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by Michelle Knowlden

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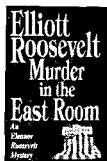


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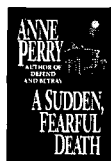
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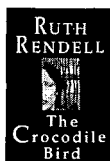
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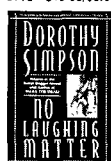
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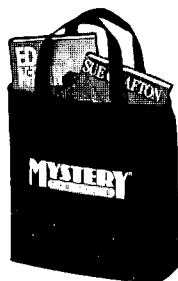
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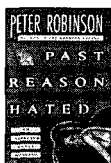


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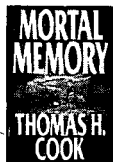
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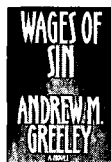
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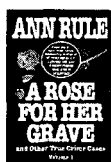
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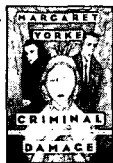
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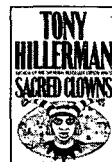
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Once upon a time, about a dozen years ago, to be more precise, there was only one set of awards—the Edgars, presented by the Mystery Writers of America—in the mystery fiction and crime nonfiction business. Since then, awards have proliferated. There are now the Shamuses (the Private Eye Writers of America), the Anthonys (Bouchercon), the Agathas (given by the Malice Domestic convention), the Macavities (Mystery Readers International), and the American Mystery Awards.

Two of these—the Shamus and Anthony awards—are presented at Bouchercon, the annual convention of mystery writers, fans, editors, agents, and other interested persons, held every October. The first

are selected by committees of PWA members—that is, by private eye fiction writers—and the second come from nominations and votes cast by Bouchercon attendees.

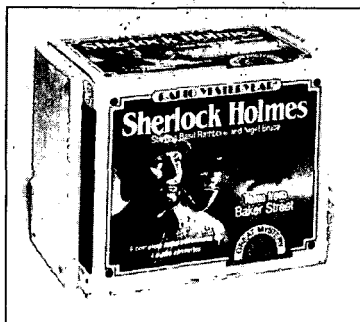
Bouchercon XXIV, which took place this October in Omaha, has recently passed at this writing, with its usual panoply of parties, panel discussions, presentations, and pspeeches (well, speeches), all under the sprawling—very sprawling—roof of the Holiday Inn on Omaha's outskirts. Hundreds and hundreds of mystery aficionados collected their complimentary convention T-shirts (bright blue with the convention logo, a globe with a jeweled dagger through the state of Nebraska), bought books in the dealers' room, had books autographed at author

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Susan A. Teitz**, Editorial Assistant; **Jean Traina**, Design Director; **Terri Czczko**, Art Director; **Anthony Bari**, Junior Designer; **Marilyn Roberts**, Senior Production Manager; **Carole Dixon**, Production Manager; **Cynthia Manson**, Director of Marketing and Subsidiary Rights; **Constance Scarborough**, Contracts Manager; **Barbara Parrott**, Director of Newsstand Circulation; **Bruce Schwartz**, Director of Circulation, Subscription Sales; **Dennis Jones**, Operations Manager, Subscription Sales; **Leslie Guarnieri**, Renewal and Billing Manager, Subscription Sales; **Fred Sabloff**, Advertising Director; **Judy Dorman**, Assistant Advertising Sales Manager. **Advertising Offices, New York:** (212) 856-6306. **Advertising Representative:** Dresner Direct, Inc., New York, New York, (212) 889-1078.

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signings, stuffed themselves on the Garden Cafe's scrumptious potato casseroles (fourteen varieties, or was it seventeen?), made expeditions into central Omaha for more food and shopping in the Old Market, dropped in on interviews with Hammond Innes or Ralph McInerny (both given Lifetime Achievement awards), set off on long treks to find their rooms (running shoes would have helped; we did, some of us, have maps), and danced away the end of Saturday night after the banquet (best dancer: Jeremiah Healy) to the music of author Max Allan Collins' Cruisin' Band, with special performances on the saxophone by Doug Allyn, whose day job, so to speak, is leading his own rock group, Devil's Triangle.

Jerry Healy ("Rest Stop," AHMM, May 1992) and Jacklyn Butler ("The Messenger," AHMM, October) were nominated for the Shamus award for Best Short Story of 1992; the prize went to Ben Schutz for "Mary, Mary, Shut the Door," *Deadly Allies*, Doubleday, it also won an Edgar this year. The other Shamus short story nominees were Loren D. Estleman, "Safe House," and Sue Grafton, "A Little Mis-

sionary Work," both also published in *Deadly Allies*, a PWA and Sisters in Crime collaboration.

The Anthony for Best Short Story was won by Diane Mott Davidson, "Cold Turkey," *Sisters in Crime* 5, Berkley. The other nominees were Edward D. Hoch, "The Summer of Our Discontent," EQMM, November 1992, Doug Allyn, "Candles in the Rain" in the same issue, and Gabrielle Kraft, "One Hit Wonder," and Rochelle Krich, "A Golden Opportunity," both from *Sisters in Crime* 5.

At the convention, Doug Allyn got word that "Candles in the Rain" had won the American Mystery Award for the 1992 best short story.

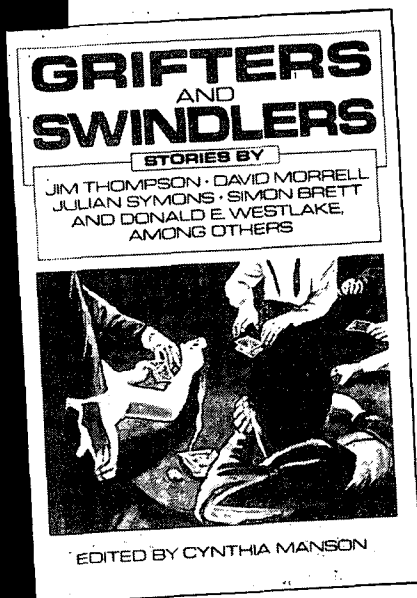
PWA gave a Lifetime Achievement Award to Marcia Muller; Bouchercon's Guest of Honor was Ed McBain. Don Sandstrom was Fan Guest of Honor.

We regret not having space for all the winners and nominees in other categories because we know many of you are interested. If you send us a stamped self-addressed envelope, we will send you the list.

Next year the convention will be in Seattle. More about that in an upcoming issue.

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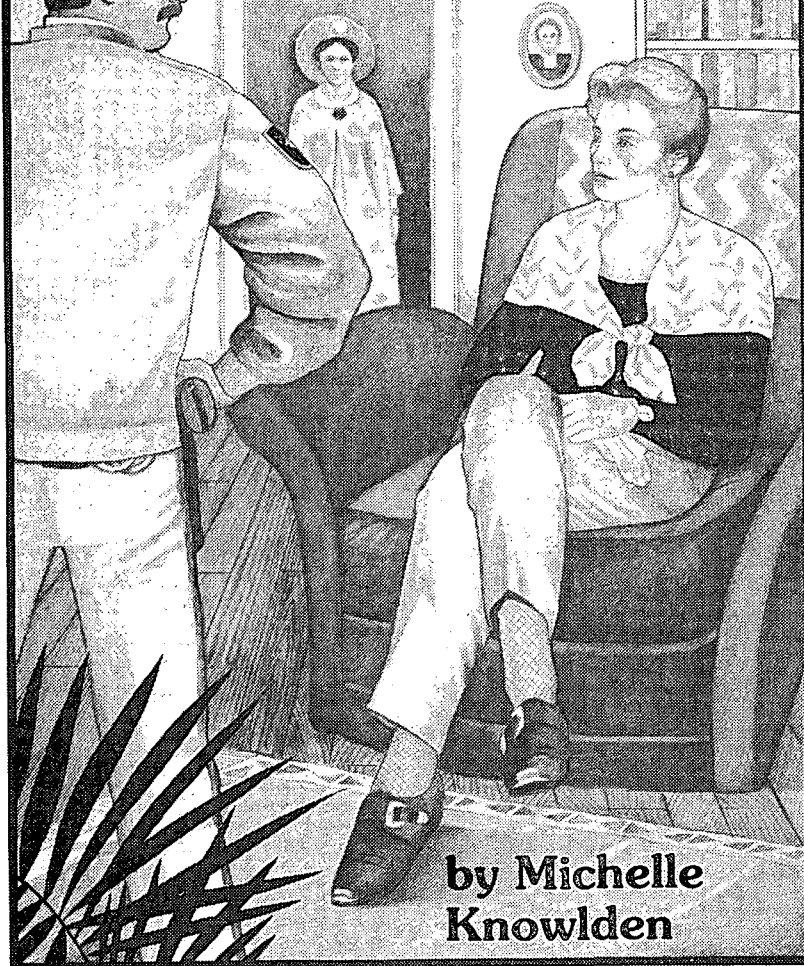
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FICTION

The Oscar Wilde Murder



by Michelle
Knowlden

Illustration by Jon Weiman

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consumption *n.* 1. a consuming or being consumed
2. the using up of goods or services 3. the amount
consumed 4. a wasting disease, tuberculosis of the
lungs

I was slowly fading away. Flesh hung thinly on my bones, and fatigue weighed me down. Dr. Stout discussed my treatment with concern and a flood of prescriptions.

In the beginning, I managed to drag myself into work for an hour each day. The Cardex & LaMare detective agency prospered during my decline—Gary LaMare had recently signed a contract with a prestigious insurance firm and was hiring additional investigators for the heavier workload. My cousin and assistant, Robyn Cardex, assisted Gary in training the new employees. During the late spring months, her own caseload of literary investigations was light. They worked in a fast-paced blur around me while I slowly read reports, signed checks, and declined a request to look into an Arizona murder investigation. I focused on *Biddle's Medical Encyclopedia*, and the alphabetical comfort it brought me.

My condition worsened. I lay in my house scarcely able to move. I called the agency and asked Gary to take over for me. Connie, my housekeeper, made sure I had food, which I picked over in a desultory way. I listened to Perry Como songs and charted my temperature. Then I unwrapped all my self-improvement tapes (Aunt Helena gives me a stack every Christmas) and cut the tape out of each one.

In an exasperated attempt to save my life, Dr. Stout decided to send me to Arizona.

"I have a friend," he said, "who owns a resort in Resoda, a small town just east of Phoenix. His wife's a nurse, and he's a fine cook. With the dry climate and a comfortable environment, you should be well in no time."

I asked Connie to pack me a bag and called Millie at the agency to make the travel arrangements. Not ten minutes after I rang off, Robyn called back to say she was coming with me.

"That's not necessary, cousin," I said. "Though I appreciate the concern . . ."

"Not concern, dear cuz. I'm sure you'll come out of it. We Cardexes are a hardy breed, able to survive most imaginary diseases. I just don't want to be left here to fend off Aunt Helena. She's called twice in the last hour looking for you. I can't figure out how that woman knows when you're not working on a case."

I brooded a bit on "imaginary diseases." "You didn't tell her I was going to Phoenix, did you? In the state I'm in, the last thing I need to hear is that she's cutting me out of the trust."

"Not news I want to hear either, Micky. Your loss affects the agency. Since that's the source of the income that qualifies me for a trust check (and incidentally an expensive graduate education in Victorian literature), I'm not telling her that you're sickening again."

I sighed painfully. "Tell Millie to arrange your travel. We leave this afternoon."

It was a pleasant flight to Phoenix. I studied a Phoenix newspaper while eating a special diet plate ordered by my secretary. Nothing of interest in the paper. It was filled with festival news, the murder of a clergyman, and local politics. I slept the rest of the flight. After we arrived in Phoenix, Robyn arranged transport to Resoda while I rested, half fainting, in the airport lounge. We Cardex women come in two types: I exemplify the thin, aesthetic one, whose translucent skin is made luminescent by the chronic immediacy of death. Robyn is the other Cardex type—has the constitution of a horse.

As we left the city, I took deep breaths of dry air. Our driver had never heard of consumption, so I described each symptom, both the textbook ones and those unique to my particular strain. I included a lively description of the various treatments Dr. Stout had tried and failed. The driver looked increasingly worried, casting furtive looks at Robyn napping beside me.

When I tired of speaking, I watched the passing desert landscape. It was early evening, and the setting sun sharply defined the outflung hills and mountains. Scrub brush dotted the red sand, which stretched out in low, rolling dunes. We entered Resoda without warning and left almost at the same moment, with as little ceremony. On the outskirts of town, we drove past a small church where a funeral had just ended. At the top of the church stairs a tall blonde woman stood speaking to a man who leaned on a cane. Our van paused as the hearse pulled in front of us and left with a stream of cars following. The lame man stared intently at our van.

The resort was located at the top of a hill outside of Resoda. If I had been feeling better, I would have enjoyed the view of the town from the crest of the hill, a spectacular sunset splashed against the

darkening sky. We arrived at the inn as it faded into an indigo blue. I prodded Robyn awake. Our hosts met the shuttle at the end of a long driveway and introduced themselves as Jim and Judy Seton. Judy clucked over my fragility and immediately ushered me into a parlor at the front of the house. Jim pressed delicate hors d'oeuvres and a glass of lemonade into my hands while I sat limply on a very comfortable sofa. Robyn brought in our suitcases in a disgruntled manner. She never woke pleasantly from afternoon naps.

While Robyn pushed the suitcases into a haphazard pile, Jim apologized for not having our rooms ready. Most of the inn's staff had been detained by the police again that day for the investigation into the minister's murder. It was obvious our hosts would have settled down and told the entire story (especially seasoned by Robyn's sudden interest), so I feebly pointed out that the hors d'oeuvre plate was empty. To Robyn's disappointment, they left for replenishments.

While they were gone, Robyn prowled the small room, picking up knickknacks and staring out the long windows. The night sky was prickled with stars. I relaxed in the quiet and wondered hazily about the dinner smells coming from another corner of the house. Robyn stiffened at the window facing the driveway.

"Company of the police variety," she announced with relish, sitting down in a chair near a rock fireplace. She scrabbled in her backpack for her notepad.

The parlor door opened, and the Setons ushered in the policeman. I stood when they entered and moved to lie half supine on a large chair near the massive rock fireplace. The Setons introduced the policeman as Martin Lindstrom. He was a large man, obviously ill at ease in circumstances where he was not in control. Lindstrom came quickly to the point.

"I'm here against my better judgment, and only because Dr. Nason insisted. When he heard you were in the area, he wondered if you had changed your mind about looking into the murder. Dr. Nason told me you had turned down his request last week, but he hopes, seeing that you're here, that you've changed your mind."

I frowned. How Freudian can one be? Ending up in the same small town where there was a case I had rejected. Not that I subscribe to conspiracy theories, but I *would* be questioning Dr. Stout when I returned. I also made a note to check *Biddle's Medical Encyclopedia* for the effects of consumption on memory.

Lindstrom cleared his throat. "I'm against amateurs interfering with professionals. But I've read about some of your cases, and what you did on the Rostanovich case was clever. We need some of that action on this case. Well, maybe not as flashy . . ."

Robyn leaned forward. "Who is this Dr. Nason?"

"He's a city councilman and the richest man in Resoda. He's also an archaeologist and on the board of elders at the Church of the Harvest. That's Reverend Patterson's church."

"And Patterson was the murder victim?"

"Yes. I go to his church. Micah Patterson was a fine man. Not too much in the brimstone line, but interesting. He was murdered right there in church, in front of the congregation—women, kids, and everyone. We haven't been able to find any motive, opportunity, or suspects. It's been three weeks now, and people are tired of waiting for answers. The mayor wants to pass this on to the Phoenix police, but we've had problems with them before. I know Dr. Nason is willing to make it worth your while."

I saw the gleam in Robyn's eye and hastily said, "Sir, I'm sorry you've wasted your time, but I'm here in Resoda for health reasons. I'm in a stage of consumption now that makes it impossible for me to work."

His brow furrowed. "Consumption? Is that some kind of diet problem?"

Robyn snickered. "Consumption is a serious lung disease," I said frostily. "More commonly known today as tuberculosis."

For the first time Jim Seton spoke. "I go to the Church of the Harvest, too. Micah Patterson has been my pastor since I was a baby. He married me and my wife, and christened our kids. We saw him murdered in God's house. Please say you'll find out who did this."

"He meant a lot to us," Judy Seton said, her eyes full of tears. "Please take the case."

"She will take the case!"

Startled, we all looked behind us to the parlor door. Aunt Helena stood there, vibrating in a majestic rage. Gregory, her secretary and unpublished poet, hovered beside her.

Lindstrom took my silent shock and resignation on seeing Aunt Helena as agreement to accepting the case. He left, not entirely

happy. The Setons also left to prepare rooms for Helena and Gregory.

I took the bull elephant by the horn (an apt metaphor if you know my aunt) and said, "Aunt Helena, what a surprise. I trust you've been well?"

"Do not fence with me, Michaela Cardex. I am not in the best of moods. Because of your irresponsibility, I have had to take valuable time from my schedule to come harrying after you. I had to take an aeroplane this evening, and you know how dangerous they are. Poor Gregory was in a state of nerves the entire flight."

"This is the nineties, Aunt Helena. Most of the bugs have been worked out of air travel."

"Enough of this. Tell me why you are hiding here in this godforsaken state."

"I'm in Arizona because the climate here is better for my lungs than Wisconsin."

"What is wrong with your lungs?"

"I have consumption."

Her eyes narrowed.

"As I told you when you had angina, when you had bursitis, and when you had cholera—this sort of subterfuge will not work with me. Your uncle's trust states that you must be working to receive your monthly check. Malingering will get you nothing."

"Aunt Helena . . ."

"Now, what will be your approach in this case?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure you'll tell me." I weakly sipped at the lemonade.

"I am glad you intend to be reasonable," she approved. "I will retire now to my room and set up assignments for each one of us. In the meantime, our immediate tasks are as follows: Robyn will go to the local newspaper to develop a historical file on Reverend Patterson. I will interview all the primary witnesses and come up with a list of suspects. Gregory will assist me. You, Michaela, will meet with Dr. Nason and look over the scene of the murder.

"We will meet back here tomorrow morning at ten and exchange information." She marched briskly out the parlor doors and up the stairs. Gregory shot Robyn and me a pathetic look and trailed after her.

Robyn groaned. "Newspaper morgues don't open till nine. What does she expect—miracles?"

I pulled myself out of the very comfortable chair and staggered to the door. "At least you don't have consumption."

With great difficulty, I managed to rise in the morning, and after a light Southwestern breakfast, I called Dr. Nason and arranged to meet him at the church. The taxi dropped me off there a few minutes early. As I stepped out of the taxi, I saw a light blue car pull over to the curb across the street. Lindstrom was at the wheel, gnawing on a health-something bar, studiously not looking at me.

I felt faint in the bright desert sun, so I wrestled open the door of the small cinder block church. It was dark inside, the stained glass windows casting weird halos of colored shadows. The church appeared to be empty as I made my halting way to the podium at the front of the church. The pews were oiled walnut, and the carpet a worn green. At the front of the church an organ flanked the raised platform on one side; an upright piano was on the other. Four plain chairs stood alone on the bare platform. The podium was placed a discreet distance from the organ.

"Mike Patterson sat on the third chair from the end. He coughed, clutched his throat, and fell to the floor. He died a few minutes later."

I swiveled around at the first words and saw nothing but a black shadow against the dazzling light shed by the open side door. Then he shut the door and paced slowly towards me. His hair was white, and he walked with a cane.

I leaned against the front pew. "Dr. Nason? I'm Micky Cardex. Thank you for coming. Is there somewhere where we can talk? My condition doesn't allow me to be on my feet for long periods of time."

"Neither does mine," he said dryly, smacking the cane against his leg. It made a hollow sound. "We have a counseling room here that should suit both of us."

While he lifted his leg onto the sofa in the small counseling room, I helped myself at the water cooler. After downing a few pills, I stumbled to an overstuffed chair near the couch. Dr. Nason was a man made somber by recent events—his leathery face was lined with pain and tension. Inexplicably, his face lightened on seeing my medication.

"Just as I heard," he nodded. "My brother was a friend of your uncle's, and still follows your career religiously. He tells me that

you solve every case you're given and each one from your deathbed. The diseases you've had, and you so young! If *I* was young again . . . "To get back my youth I would do anything in the world, except take exercise, get up early, or be respectable." He laughed heartily.

"Oscar Wilde?" I hazarded.

He nodded, looking inordinately pleased. "The brilliance of your deductions—that's what we need here. The same genius that solved the Rostanovich case with, well, maybe not so much drama. This is a small town, you understand."

I prefer my flattery unmixed, so I directed him back to the case at hand. "Were you present when Reverend Patterson was murdered here three weeks ago?"

"Yes," he said, his mood once more serious. "I was on the platform, had the end seat. Mike sat next to me, Cathy deWitter—our associate pastor—sat next to Mike, and Larry Hawke—our choir director—sat in the last chair. Nothing out of the ordinary occurred that morning. We have a communion service once a month, always performed in the same manner. Maurice Hawke, the usher, passed the elements to Ken Crosser, the communion moderator, who passed them to Larry, and then down the line. When they reached me, I passed the plates to the organist, Pat Ho. Before Maurice gave the plate to Ken, the only other person who had access to the elements was Hillary Packer, who prepares the elements."

"And the poison was in the grape juice?"

"Yes, and only Mike's cup was affected. Mike had a special pewter communion cup that he used on Sundays—his sister gave it to him. He said his reusable cup was better for the environment. The rest of the congregation and pastoral staff use the disposable plastic cups. That's how we know it was not a random killing."

"Are Maurice and Larry Hawke related?"

"Brothers."

"Tell me about Reverend Patterson."

"I know it makes your job harder, but Mike was a good man. He had no enemies. He had been pastor here in Resoda since graduating from the seminary over thirty years ago. He cared for people, and helped more in this town than any government social program. If you were down on your luck, you'd look up Mike first. Maurice had a drinking problem, and Mike got him into a program. Ken Crosser's wife died suddenly a year ago, and Mike counseled him. Now Ken's engaged to Cathy. Cathy grew up in Resoda in a family

that never had much money. When she got the call to ministry, Mike made sure she had money for college and seminary. When Hillary's husband died of a heart condition last year, Mike kept her busy with jobs around the church. Do you want to hear about his youth ministry and programs for the homeless?"

I fingered one of my pill bottles. Even when healthy, it's difficult to listen to the details of an exemplary life. "Will I be able to obtain a list of those he was counseling at the time of his death?"

"I think Officer Lindstrom had his appointment book, but I can give you the name of one now. Me."

I lifted my eyebrow, but was too weary to ask. He was staring at the wall where the words I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH CHRIST WHO STRENGTHENS ME were printed in large block letters. "My leg was amputated fourteen months ago. Diabetes. I guess I wasn't handling it too well. I'm an archaeologist and not happy unless I'm in the field. Hate teaching smart-mouth undergraduates, too. Seemed like the end of the world."

I'd never get diabetes. Something that required shots and a diet was not for me.

He sighed. "Mike talked to me some. Made sure I had meals coming to my house and plenty of company. I live alone. A month ago he put me together with Larry Hawke on a project—authenticating some letters and unfinished poems purported to be by Oscar Wilde. It's not the trenches, but I'm beginning to find it interesting."

"Why Larry Hawke?" I managed.

"Larry's a literary type. Has a doctorate in Victorian literature."

I nodded slightly. Victorian lit—this'll interest Robyn, I thought.

"I guess Mike also saw Cathy and Ken for marriage counseling. It's expected for all couples getting married in our church. Even Cathy, as associate pastor, wouldn't be exempt. I know Mike met with Ken the Friday before the poisoning. I think he was concerned about Ken's previous marriage. Heard he had been talking to Ken's wife's doctor that week."

Dr. Nason paused, his hand clenched tightly around his cane. "He also stopped by Hillary's Saturday morning. That was the anniversary of her husband's death. He mentioned it to me when we had dinner Saturday night. You might want to talk to her, too—maybe he said something to her that would help. You can also talk to Mary, our church secretary, about the rest of his schedule if you can't get Mike's appointment book."

I sat silently on the chair. I wondered if I had time for a short nap before Aunt Helena roared back to the inn. "Ms. Cardex, I want you to know that I appreciate your taking this case. Though it means that someone I know will be implicated, the truth is the least we owe to Mike Patterson."

I wondered if I would at least have time for a snack.

Time for a snack was not immediately apparent. Aunt Helena was impatiently pacing the entryway to the inn when I returned. Gregory and Robyn were waiting in the parlor, which Helena had staked out as our center of operations. She stalked up and down the room while I found a chair next to the coffeepot. I gingerly felt my neck. My glands were definitely more swollen today.

I was ordered to debrief the troops first. I repeated my conversation with Dr. Nason verbatim, and described the layout of the church with the location of the key characters. I finished just as Judy Seton brought in chips and salsa and placed them within my reach.

Robyn's report was next on the agenda. Robyn spent twenty minutes explaining how Mike Patterson was another Mother Teresa. By the time she concluded, even sentimental Gregory was growing restive. The only facts of oblique interest reported were that Patterson was raised in Phoenix and, as an undergraduate, attended the same university as Hillary Packer's late husband. Patterson never married but had been engaged to Jessy Medina. Six months after the canceled engagement, Jessy married Lloyd deWitter. They had one child—Cathy.

Helena rattled her report next. She had procured a copy of the police report. She refused to say how Patterson had been killed by cyanide poisoning. She listed the suspects—Maurice and Larry Hawke, Hillary Packer, Cathy deWitter, Ken Crosser, and Dr. Nason. I stirred myself enough to object to Dr. Nason's name on the list. He had been sitting to the right of Patterson and had no opportunity to drop the poison in the reverend's cup. Helena insisted it remain, as Dr. Nason was a church elder, and, she added (with a knowing look), church politics often take a deadly turn.

As Helena's choice of suspects often helps me determine who the suspect is not, I persuaded her to select one on the list.

"Maurice Hawke, of course." She opened the church directory and pointed to a photo. "Maurice Hawke is the one with long hair and that unsightly beard; most murderers look just like him. Also

the fact that he was a drunk signifies he would be prone to thinking of poison as a means to murder. Therefore, it is obvious that he is the murderer."

Gregory tenderly touched his longish hair. Robyn and I looked at Aunt Helena.

"Our efforts must be intensified now that we are on his trail. After lunch, the plans are as follows: Gregory and I will go to Maurice Hawke's residence and gather additional evidence: Michaela, you will interview Larry Hawke and uncover everything unsavory about his brother. I understand that Ken Crosser employed Maurice at one time; you will interview him also. Robyn, you will see Hillary Packer and Cathy deWitter. Maurice has the shifty eyes of a womanizer. See what the women can tell you."

At least we got lunch.

After lunch (a symphony of cold meats, cheeses, and creamy desserts), Judy Seton dropped me off at the Resoda museum. The receptionist directed me to the research offices in the back, after requiring me to pay a small donation to enter. There was little in the museum except a few baskets and some shattered pottery. Large, colorful posters described each piece as if it deserved a place in the Smithsonian. I paused over an elaborate diorama detailing the daily life of the local Indians. As described in the cards around the recreated village, the original Resodans led rather tiresome lives.

In the dim room behind the upbeat displays, three local scholars bent over their work. Two were reading, and the third carefully brushed at a pottery shard.

I cleared my throat. "Larry Hawke?"

One of the readers raised his head. "Yes?"

"My name is Micky Cardex. I'm investigating the murder of Micah Patterson. May I have a few moments?"

The other reader looked up when I mentioned the murder and listened avidly. No wonder—he was reading Melville. The woman with the shard also stopped her brushing.

Larry Hawke rose to his feet and, to the disappointment of the other two, directed me into a cramped office at the back of the work area. After I sat down, I waited while Hawke poured himself a cup of coffee. He was different from his brother Maurice. His short hair, conservative clothes, and grimly cheery face marked his teacher

profession. Helena would have said that he looked decidedly un-murdererlike.

"I'm glad you're taking the case, Ms. Cardex. The local police can't be objective in a situation like this. How can I help you? I was there, saw the whole thing, but am as stumped as the police. It had to be one of us on the platform or Hillary, but I think that's impossible. I would suspect myself before any of the others. Am I the prime suspect?" He smiled nervously and wiped damp hands on his pants.

"'Before I could answer that, I should have to see your soul.'"

His face lit up. "You read Oscar Wilde? Why, this is marvelous! He's a bit of an obsession with me right now. Did Dr. Nason tell you we were working on some documents that might be by Oscar himself? Just some letters, essays, and doggerel verses. Fascinating subject."

"How did you come by these documents?"

"A woman from England retired here in Resoda about ten years ago. Name of Emily Manning. She died last April and donated her belongings to the church. Mike Patterson asked me to go through some old papers she had stored in her attic, mostly old family letters and legal documents, some dating back almost two hundred years. It appeared that a cousin, a generation or two back, had been friends with Wilde, and corresponded with him while Wilde was in prison."

"Are you close to authenticating the documents?"

"I think we are. What's difficult about the task is that none of the papers is signed, and the handwriting's ambiguous. His initials are on one of the letters. The rest are signed 'Divvy,' which seemed to be a joke between the cousin and Wilde. We might have finished if Mike had lived, but now we're doing it the hard way."

"How would Reverend Patterson have helped?"

"A few days before he was killed, he told me that Emily had given him an old letter during a brag session about ancestry. She left it with him, and he had forgotten about it till I mentioned our difficulties. He couldn't remember any of the details but promised to pass it to Dr. Nason when they had dinner. I guess he forgot—Dr. Nason said he never got the letter, and Mike was killed the next day. We couldn't find the letter afterwards. This wouldn't have anything to do with the murder, would it?"

I pulled out a bottle of pills and peered at the label. "I doubt it. How is Cathy deWitter doing as Patterson's replacement?"

"Their ministry styles are different, but she gives a good sermon. I know Mike planned to retire in a few years and always intended to pass the pastorate to her. He thinks . . . thought a lot of her."

"How is Hillary Packer taking Patterson's death?"

"Not well. I think she became too dependent on Mike after her husband died. Her husband had a kidney ailment for years, but died in the hospital in the end. She was not adjusting to being alone or even to doing things for herself. Mike was teaching her how to do her finances and gave her jobs around the church to help her feel useful. We're all taking turns spending time with her, but she's pretty devastated."

"Things going well between DeWitter and Ken Crosser?"

Hawke gave me a sharp look. "I guess so. I hadn't heard anything to the contrary. Why?"

"Just trying to build a picture." I stood up. "Thank you for your time, Professor Hawke."

Outside the museum, the sun was high and the air hot. Lindstrom loitered in front of a drugstore two doors down from the church, sipping from a can of diet-something.

I paused in the parking lot and took deep gulps of the dry air. Wisconsin in June can be humid and uncomfortable. I watched a leaf skitter across the street. Almost imperceptibly, the pressure in my chest eased.

I walked to Crosser Engineering, Inc., located in a small office building near the museum. The company was composed of two engineers, a secretary, and a draftsman. While I waited for Crosser to finish a previous meeting, I asked for water. I took a pill from each of seven bottles. The secretary watched with great interest.

A stack of brochures lay on the table beside me. I unfolded one and read stylishly-phrased descriptions about Crosser Engineering and its place in the container business. Pictures of sunlight glinting off large cylinders were arranged among the advertising text. Well-known names in the fumigation and disposal industry provided glowing testimonials. Crosser Engineering offered a filling service with its containers. Disposal fees were negotiable.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting, Ms. Cardex. May I call you Michaela? I've read about some of your cases in the newspaper and have been looking forward to meeting you."

Ken Crosser came out of his office. Fit and aggressive, he had the corporate look. At thirty-five and about to embark on a second marriage, he wore complacency like his business suit.

"I prefer Micky. My aunt is the only one who uses Michaela."

"Micky it is, then." He led me into his office.

"I hope you're not going to ask me about this business with Mike Patterson. I was in no shape to notice anything that morning."

"Why not?"

"It was the first time I had been up on the church platform. You'll probably think it odd—I mean, I own this company, so why should I be nervous in front of a small church? But I was. It's not easy marrying a pastor."

"Why *are* you marrying again?"

He looked at me with surprise. "You don't sound in favor of marriage."

"I've nothing against it for other people. I myself can't afford the hazards of matrimony with my precarious health. I understand your first marriage was difficult."

"Because Meggy was an invalid? I knew when we married she had a weak heart. She lasted longer than any of us expected. I lived with the idea of her death for a long time."

"She died quickly at the end?"

"It seemed forever to me." He rubbed his chin. "I guess that sounds awful, but it's hard to watch someone die."

"How long have you known Cathy deWitter?"

"Since I married Meggy. She had been my wife's friend since they were in diapers. Meggy used to joke that if I hadn't met and married her while Cathy was away at school, I would have married Cathy instead. There was always a feeling of, well, a feeling of understanding between Cathy and me."

"The proper basis for marriage is a mutual misunderstanding." I smiled apologetically. "Sorry, Oscar Wilde's been on my mind."

"Ah, you've been talking to Nason and Hawke," he chuckled. "They've been quoting Wilde like the Bible lately. People are beginning to avoid them."

"I understand you had dinner with the pastor on the Friday before he was killed. Did he say anything out of the ordinary?"

"Not really. Talked a bit about Hawke's obsession with those old letters of Miss Manning's. Talked a lot about Cathy and how much she meant to him. She's the daughter of his old girlfriend, you know."

I started to feel faint again. With consumption, the body needs frequent nourishment, and Judy Seton had been making tortillas

for flautas when I left that afternoon. I stood up.

"Thank you for your time. You've been most helpful."

Crosser was frowning when I walked out of the office. I wondered if Jim had prepared more of his delightful black beans.

"Is that the last of the flautas? Did you ask DeWitter and Hillary Packer about Maurice's criminal tendencies?"

Robyn passed me the flauta platter. "No. Did you ask his brother or Crosser about Maurice's murderous intentions?"

"No. Pass the relleños, please. How did Cathy deWitter feel about taking over as pastor? More of the rice, too."

Robyn and I had sat down to dinner without Aunt Helena and Gregory. Their absence was no small irritant. In her zeal for justice, Aunt Helena has often created enormous problems. Once it meant bailing her and Gregory out of jail at three A.M.

"She seems confident about it. She's been at the church for more than six years as associate pastor. Patterson had passed her more and more of his own work over the years. The timing of the murder was bad. She's getting married next month."

"Murders are generally timed right only for the killers. Are there any beans left?"

"I ate the last of them. Reverend deWitter said that Patterson was worried about something. He called a special meeting with the elders for after Sunday services the morning of his murder. He asked her to attend because it concerned her. She didn't know what Patterson planned to present to the elders."

"I think I do. Are those Mexican sweet breads in the basket there?"

Robyn ignored me, letting her fork play absently with a pile of sweet corn cake. "Is it Dr. Nason you suspect or Larry Hawke?"

"Why?" I cocked my head towards her.

"Those manuscripts are a scholar's dream. A ticket to recognition and a prestigious appointment. Worth killing for."

"Think so?" I buttered a tortilla. "Shall I add your name to the suspects' list?"

She threw me a rueful look and took the last sweet bread. "Don't discount it."

Aunt Helena burst into the dining room followed by Gregory, who looked harassed. "It's not Maurice Hawke," she announced. "But after careful investigation and some clever queries on my part, I have discovered who it is. Feed Gregory. He's famished."

Robyn passed him the remains of our dinner—a spoonful of rice and half an enchilada. Gregory looked crestfallen.

“Who’s the murderer?” I asked Helena while pouring out a tablespoon of medicine.

“The pastor killed himself. All the other suspects have impeccable reputations and no motives—therefore, it could only have been suicide.”

“Why would he kill himself, Aunt?”

“His broken engagement was preying on his mind.”

“That was nearly thirty years ago. I’m sure he’d gotten over it by now.”

“Men of the cloth often go mad, Michaela, no matter what the timing. It’s the symbolizing and abstracting they are forever doing. It ruins their reason.”

“Makes sense,” said Robyn. “Wilde said: ‘... I remember last season asking a most dreadful conspirator to dinner, a man who had blown up ever so many people and always wore a coat of mail, and carried a dagger up his shirtsleeve; and do you know when he came he looked just like a nice old clergyman. ...’ So I guess if a terrorist can look like a clergyman, then a clergyman can act like a terrorist.”

“Don’t encourage her,” I muttered in an undertone. I raised my voice. “I assure you, Aunt, Reverend Patterson did not kill himself.”

Helena sniffed. “Michaela, I have tried to instruct you in the proper deductive process, but you refuse to learn. I called the police, that nice Officer Lindstrom, and told him to visit us tonight. I asked him to set up a meeting with Mr. Crosser, Professor Hawke, and Dr. Nason. I intend to hand over the results of my investigation so that we may return to Wisconsin in the morning.”

“You did what?”

“I do not mean to spend another day in this desert. There are more cases to solve in civilization, where ministers do not run mad, and food can be eaten without antacids.”

The door bell rang. Robyn and I exchanged a look.

“Officer Lindstrom and three other men are waiting in the sitting room,” announced Jim Seton. Aunt Helena sailed out of the dining room, and Gregory followed, dabbing sadly at his mouth.

I hung back. “Robyn, go in and stall for a few minutes. I need to get something out of my room.” I hesitated. “This may be more dangerous than we expect. Don’t let Aunt provoke anyone.”

I was gone for only a few minutes, but Helena was pontificating when I returned and most of our visitors looked angry. Robyn shrugged at my reproachful look. Upon seeing me, Dr. Nason struggled out of his chair. He was furious.

"I hired you to find a murderer, not slur a fine man. If you can't find the killer, then admit it, and stop wasting our time."

"We have found the murderer, sir," I said calmly. I nodded at Officer Lindstrom. "My report is not complete, but I'll be happy to discuss my preliminary findings."

"With all of us." Dr. Nason was definite. The rest of the men nodded.

I looked at Robyn and nodded my head to the door. She moved there quietly while I walked to the stone fireplace and leaned heavily against the mantel.

"Motives for murder are usually limited to hatred, fear, or convenience. I knew from the beginning that Reverend Micah Patterson was killed because of knowledge he possessed. He was killed that morning because the murderer desperately wanted to prevent him from revealing that knowledge to the board of elders.

"Because of the visibility of those on the platform and the limited time each held the communion plate, only three people had the opportunity to drop the poison in the pastor's cup: Hillary Packer, Maurice Hawke, and Ken Crosser."

I hesitated, glancing at Robyn. "It's important to note that the pastor was killed with cyanide—a poison that causes sudden death. I verified this in my *Bedside Reference of Drugs, Vitamins, and Poisons*, which I always carry with me. Cyanide is easier to come by than most would suspect, but Ken Crosser and Maurice Hawke would have the easiest access to it of all those on the platform that Sunday. There was a plentiful supply of it at Crosser Engineering, which offers a filling service to their fumigation customers."

Larry Hawke stirred in his seat. "My brother did not kill Mike—he..."

"I'm not accusing him, Professor Hawke. My aunt's convictions about your brother persuaded me otherwise." Helena smiled graciously.

I fingered the cold metal object in my pocket. "Although your wife was ill all her life, she did die suddenly, Mr. Crosser."

He sat up with a start. "What! Now you're accusing me? This is even more absurd than your suicide theory. Why would I murder him?"

"Because he discovered you had murdered your wife. He had conversations with your wife's doctor the week before he was killed. When her body is exhumed, I am certain we will find that Margaret Crosser died of cyanide poisoning."

Crosser stared at me, his lips set in a thin, humorless line. I continued. "You fell in love with Cathy deWitter and had tired of caring for an invalid who was taking too long to die. Evidently your wife's doctor said something to make the pastor suspicious. Mike Patterson went to your house Friday night and gave you a chance to turn yourself over to the police. He told you if you did not he would inform the board of elders and your fiancée. You killed him Sunday morning to stop him."

Lindstrom started toward him. Before he could reach him, Crosser stood up quickly and pulled out a gun. I lifted a hand. "Put it away, Crosser. Don't make this worse than it already is."

Larry Hawke suddenly vaulted off the sofa toward Crosser and grabbed his arm. I shouted a warning and took out my gun. Hawke was hanging on to Crosser's gun hand, which swung violently back and forth as he struggled to free himself. Lindstrom was moving toward the pair when Crosser's gun went off. I stumbled back a few steps. It was suddenly still. Crosser held his gun on me with both trembling hands, his face ashen. Hawke stood back in the shadows and looked at me with shock.

I trained my own gun on the murderer in the approved police stance. "I'm warning you, I took third in the 1984 Wisconsin sharpshooter competition. You can't outgun me."

After a long moment, Crosser's hand dropped to his side. Lindstrom took his gun and handcuffed him. Though I tried to prevent her, Judy Seton called for an ambulance, and Helena sent Gregory outside to direct them. Robyn took the gun from me and gave me a level look.

"Micky—that's my gun, and I was the sharpshooter."

"Oh yeah, that's right. I forgot."

"You're bleeding pretty badly. Why don't you sit down?"

I glanced down at my arm where a red stain was spreading. "It's just a scratch, Robyn. Why are you fussing? This is nothing compared to consumption."

Four days later, Robyn and I took a flight back to Wisconsin. Aunt Helena and Gregory had returned the day after the shooting. Helena said Gregory's nerves were much affected by the excite-

ment. She was concerned that the events would have a detrimental effect on his poetry. I didn't see how—his rending pathos couldn't get more overdone.

I was flipping through *Biddle's Medical Encyclopedia* while Robyn read from an Oscar Wilde anthology. The day before we left, Dr. Nason found the letter that Reverend Patterson had promised to show him. He told me, his voice shaking with emotion, that it appeared the documents were genuine Wilde. He promised to send us confirmation of the authentication and their published treatise.

Nothing interested me in *Biddle's*. The consumption worked out as I hoped and was now almost completely out of my system. I ran down the list of genetic disorders, plagues, viruses, and infections. Nothing appealed to me. It appeared that I would be in for a spell of good health.

"Here's one for you, Micky." Robyn read. "'Many American ladies on leaving their native land adopt an appearance of chronic ill-health, under the impression that it is a form of European refinement . . .'"

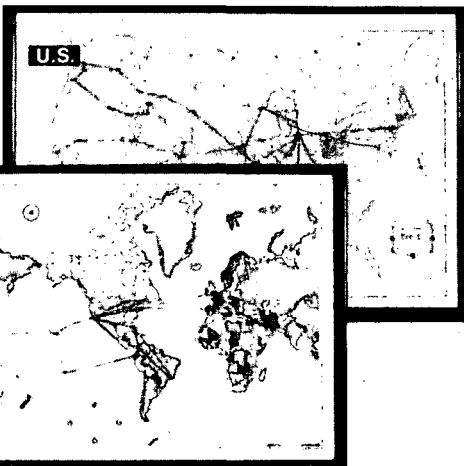
I gave her an unfriendly look. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Nothing," she grinned. "Absolutely nothing."

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FICTION

There Are No Stars Over San Juan

by Kenneth Gavrell

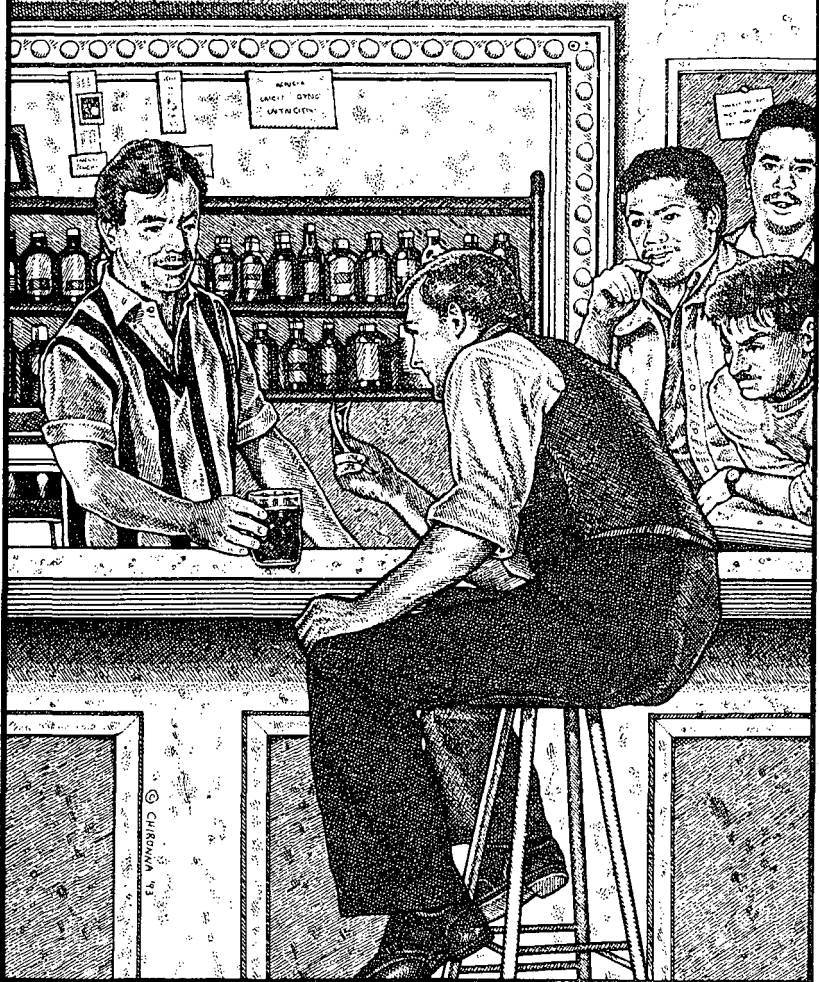


Illustration by Ron Chironna

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Green, white-frosted waves flopped on the sand with the regularity of a metronome. Above them a few gulls were practicing aerial maneuvers. I was opening a fresh can of beer. It was my third.

After a love affair collapses, the city in which it took place becomes an insidious trap. There are bits of wreckage to prick your memory at every turn.

The crazy restaurant where the waiters literally ran in and out of the kitchen.

The flamenco bar where an aging female drunk kept asking me if I meant to finish my drink.

The club where we won the dance contest in the merengue.

The parking lot where Raquel dropped the bottle of expensive French wine.

San Juan was full of such snags for me. So I had decided to get out of town for the day. I was seated at Playa Azul, an hour from the city, under a coconut palm, my back against a fallen trunk and my feet toying with the sand. My trusty cooler was under my elbow.

The beach was virtually deserted, which I found odd for two o'clock on a shiny afternoon. A fat tourist was turning a frightening shade of red on a canvas chair in the middle of

the sand. Up to the left, two lovers were experimenting with various patterns of limb entwining. A young man far down to my right was jogging along the edge of the water.

The last thing in the world I felt like doing was jogging—or moving much more than my gullet. I was in a mood to feel sorry for myself. Raquel was actually gone, and I was out in the cold again. Reports that the planet was warming were incorrect; mine had been getting colder for some weeks and was now in a state of deep freeze.

And, maybe to punish myself still further, I'd given up smoking. I spent twenty-four hours a day wanting a cigarette but too proud to take one. I'd given up in the middle of a pack two weeks ago—an absolutely unpremeditated impulse—and kept the unfinished pack in my desk drawer as a kind of symbol. I wasn't sure of what. I hoped to still have it twenty years from now when I still would be off cigarettes.

The couple wrestling in the brush behind the beach weren't doing anything for my mood. I decided I'd better get back to San Juan and check out things at the office.

I was surprised to find Raul there; he usually came in mornings when my part-time

secretary Maria was on the job. He looked more like he was dressed to go jogging than to run leads.

"You changing your image?" I asked.

"Exercise, *jefe*. Keeps you in shape. I'm twenty-six now, you know."

"You went to Banco de Boriquén like that?"

"They know me now, *jefe*; it doesn't matter what I wear."

"Did you get that mortgage information?"

He waved a piece of paper at me. "I was just going to put it on your desk."

"And the stuff on the deed?"

Raul indicated another piece of paper already on the desk. "Right there, along with the memo from Maria about your calls. You take the day off, chief?"

"I decided to take a drive to Playa Azul. Communion with Mother Nature." I walked over to the filing cabinet. "Want a drink?"

Raul's lean, acned, twenty-six-year-old face regarded my bottle of Palo Viejo with something like horror. "I'm going jogging, chief?"

"Heavens to Betsy, forgive me." I poured myself three fingers.

"Even you gave up smoking," Raul said with an incongruous tone of accusation.

"It was in a moment of temporary insanity which I have lived to regret."

"You haven't gone *back* on them?" Raul asked.

"No, I enjoy being perverse to myself."

I swallowed my rum and ran down the list of phone calls while Raul announced that he was off to run three miles. I half-waved goodbye. The calls were pretty much routine: two answers to calls of my own, one from a company I was working a case for, one from a political party (we were in the throes of pre-election), one from a woman who thought her husband was defrauding her on a divorce settlement (Raul's leads). The only item that piqued my curiosity was a woman who'd called twice and whom I'd never heard of. That sounded like a new client. I dialed the number.

"*Diga*," a not-young-sounding female voice answered.

"*Buenas tardes*," I said. "*Soy Carlos Bannón, el detective privado—creo que usted me llamó?*"

"*Ah, sí*," she said. "*Yo quería hablar con usted sobre la posibilidad de una investigación*." I wanted to talk to you about a possible investigation.

"That's what I'm here for," I said. "Can you give me the details?"

"Can't we talk in person?" she suggested. "I'd prefer that."

"I suppose I would, too. Will you come here or would you prefer to meet someplace?"

"Can you come to my house?" she asked. "I live in Santiago Iglesias."

"All right," I said. "When?"

"Is right now a bad time?"

"No, right now's a fine time."

I jotted down her address, took another fortifying shot of Palo Viejo, and locked up the office. I pointed my aging Nissan in the direction of Santiago Iglesias.

It was an old urbanization on the outskirts of Rio Piedras. Part of it was turning commercial, and all of it looked a bit run-down. As I was searching for the house, I found myself caught up in the chaos of a political cavalcade. Loudspeakers blaring, flags waving, one of our august politicians was soliciting my vote. The name in the mindless jingle screeching from the loudspeakers was Arana. Apparently Sr. Arana was running for commonwealth senator. If he won, he'd become a member of the highest paid legislature in the western hemisphere. Those characters never tired of voting themselves hefty raises.

And suddenly there was Mr. Arana himself, shaking hands with anything that got in his

path. As he passed me, fuming, he thrust a hairy, shirtsleeved hand in the car window and grabbed my own. "*Encantado conocerle*," he beamed and quickly passed on to the next gridlocked car.

The caravan moved on in fifteen minutes, and I was able to locate my prospective client's house, a one story near-pink concrete structure squeezed between two others with a two story prefab breathing down its back. Housing plots in Puerto Rico are tiny to begin with, and everyone seems to add on right to the property line.

All the windows and the door were grilled with *rejas*. I reached through and banged an old brass knocker in the shape of a carp. The door opened quickly. A smiling overweight woman in her sixties remarked that I must be "Señor Bannon." She wore a paisley housedress that reached to her ankles and a blue stone around her neck that looked like it should be uncomfortably heavy.

I showed her my P.I. license as she unlocked the *reja* and stood back to let me in. She led the way into a dark, damp living room that was crammed with furniture and was as fresh as a pharaoh's tomb.

"*Quería usted café?*" she asked. Would you like some coffee?

I declined. What I needed was a cold beer.

She told me to take the sofa—it was the most comfortable—while she lowered herself into a high-backed, overstuffed armchair that looked as old as Marie Antoinette.

“Just how did you get my name, Sra. Vega?” I began.

“From José Pagán,” she said.

Apparently the name was supposed to talk to me. It didn’t.

“You helped him locate his daughter,” she said. “It was about—” she calculated “—eight years ago.”

A few of the details came back to me. It wasn’t an especially memorable case; the girl had run away with a rock musician.

“And what sort of problem do you have?” I asked.

“My sister Awilda was murdered a month ago,” she said.

I wasn’t sure how to react. “Are you certain she was murdered?” I asked tentatively.

“Yes. Everyone is certain. She was shot three times from a parked car in front of her house. She was going to the supermarket.”

“And the police . . .”

“The police have been investigating for a month and have come up with no explanation.”

“Have they a theory?”

“They think it may have been a case of mistaken identity. I think they are simply trying to cover their own inadequacy. That is why I asked Sr. Pagán for your name.”

She toyed with the oval-shaped blue rock hanging from her neck. Its color exactly matched one of the blues in her housedress.

“Well, this sounds a lot more complicated than Sr. Pagán’s problem,” I said. “I’ll need to know everything: your sister’s history, her acquaintances, her character, her activities. If she had her ‘dark side,’ I have to know about it. Her enemies, no matter how trivial the reasons may seem. I have to see the scene of the shooting and talk to any witnesses. I want to know all about the car. And that’s just for starters.”

As I ended my spiel, she got up and switched on the wooden ceiling fan. It helped a little, but I continued to sweat through the back of my shirt.

“You know, I’m an atheist,” she said, seemingly apropos of nothing. “I believe we have only one life, and I don’t believe it should be cut short before its time. My sister was younger than me—just sixty. She had perhaps twenty more years ahead of her.”

I waited patiently, fighting down my usual desire for a cigarette. She continued:

"Awilda lived a quiet life, like I do. Her husband Julio died over ten years ago from cancer. Her son is doing his own thing, as they say nowadays; I doubt he gave her much money—if any. He never was worth much.

"She was going out to do her weekly food shopping. It was about four in the afternoon. Halfway between her front door and her car in the driveway, she was shot down by someone in a large black American car parked across the street from her house. The car had dark tinted windows. It sped away immediately after the gunshots. She was dead by the time her neighbors got to her."

"Did your sister have any enemies that you know of?" I inserted.

"Perhaps her neighbors didn't all love her, but none of them would have shot her."

"I presume she was not involved with any man."

She just looked at me, her lips tight, her cheekbones set.

"It sounds like a professional sort of killing," I said. "That may amount to something like a lead. Do you think your sister's death had anything to do with her son?"

Her chunky features loosened a bit. I could see she'd thought about that possibility.

"Yes, I think it could have," she said. "From what I hear, Orlando's an *atorrante*, a cheap hood. I haven't seen him in two—maybe three—years."

I questioned her more about the son, about her sister's history and character. I asked her for a good photo of Awilda. She produced a clear color shot that had been taken the previous Christmas on her sister's porch. Though the sister was thinner, her hair less gray, the family resemblance was evident. I liked the face that stared out at me.

"Now I want to see the scene of the shooting," I said. "Is it far from here?"

"A block and a half," Sra. Vega said. She started locking up the house. Nobody in San Juan leaves anything open. "If I had been home at the time," she said, "I would have heard the shots."

The damned political caravan was still in the neighborhood. I heard the Arana ditty all the way to the other house. I was sorry I wasn't registered to vote: I would have liked to vote against Arana and his irritating song.

The house to which Sra. Vega took me was no bigger than her own, older, and badly in need of a paint job. I recognized the blue porch from the

photo. She showed me where the car had been parked, according to the neighbors. It had been within the easiest kind of shooting distance.

"Which neighbors saw the black car?" I asked.

"Oh, all of them. All of them that were home."

"Nobody wondered about it?"

"It was only there for perhaps twenty minutes before my sister was shot."

"Who would be the best neighbors to talk to?"

"Sra. Quintana—she lives there—" she indicated the house directly across from her sister's "—and Sra. Irizarry in the house next to Awilda's. They were my sister's best friends in the neighborhood, and they both noticed the car before it happened. Neither of their husbands was home."

Sra. Vega introduced me to the woman next door first, a very short, very thin woman in her fifties. She was smoking a cigarette. Occasionally I captured a whiff. I asked her about her theories regarding the murder.

"Awilda seldom went out except to shop for food. She was almost a recluse, actually. Her son practically never came around. Except for us—" she swept her hand around "—I think Awilda had few acquaintances." She released some

more smoke in my direction while she thought. "Unless it had to do with her son's connections, I can't think of anything."

"Where does her son live?" I asked.

"Who knows? I'm not sure he 'lives' anywhere. He hangs around the seedier sections of Santurce. From what I hear, he's involved in the little *raqueteos*—stolen goods, small-time prostitution, maybe some drugs."

Sra. Vega, beside me, shook her grey head. "Chucho was always the thorn in poor Awilda's side."

"Chucho? I thought his name was Orlando," I said.

"He likes to call himself Chucho. He thinks he looks like the singer Chucho Avellanet."

"He looks about as much like him as I do," Sra. Irizarry put in.

"Would you have a recent photo of him?" I asked Sra. Vega.

"No," she said, "nothing that would help you. Chucho's about thirty-five now; the last photo I have was taken twenty years ago."

"How might I go about locating him?"

"You might try the phone book," Sra. Irizarry suggested, apparently without sarcasm. (I

did try it later, but without success.)

A few minutes later I was talking with the other neighbor, Sra. Quintana, an elderly woman, much overweight, who moved as if she had no knees. Most of the older urbanizations contained older residents, and this one was no exception.

Sra. Quintana also took a dim view of the dead woman's son. She several times referred to him as the "*sin vergüenza*." He'd broken his mother's heart—a decent woman like Sra. Medina. You never knew how your children would turn out.

She raised her eyes skyward as if to say it was all part of God's plan.

I tried to get additional details about the shooter's car. Nobody had thought to jot down the license plate—before it was too late and the car was speeding away. Because of the dark glass, no one had seen the person inside. None of the three women could identify the make of the "big American car."

I walked with Sra. Vega back to my own car.

"I normally charge forty dollars an hour plus expenses," I said.

She nodded. "I can afford it," she said.

"I'll keep strict accounts. If I think I'm getting nowhere, I'll

tell you so and drop my investigation."

"I hope that won't happen, Sr. Bannon," she said. "Sr. Pagan says that you are very good."

She was smiling—it was more like a stone-faced grimace—as I angled out of the parking space and U-turned my Nissan toward my office.

"Hello, Roberto."

"Hello, Carlos. What do you want this time?"

"What makes you think I want something?"

"When else do you give me a call?" Roberto said.

"All right, so I want something. You should be flattered that I rely on your information so completely."

"I'm the only contact in Homicide you have."

"Not true," I said, "there's also Moisés Romero."

"He's retiring in six months," Roberto said. "Or didn't you know that?" I heard the snap of his cigarette lighter over the phone. "Which case is it?"

"A woman named Awilda Vega de Medina. September third. Santiago Iglesias urbanization."

"I didn't work it," Roberto Burgos said. "Let me pull the file and look it over. Call back in fifteen minutes or so."

I hung up and got the bottle out of the file cabinet. I took the first one quick and savored the second, reflecting that it had been nice of Roberto not to mention Raquel. He had seemed almost as upset by our breaking up as I was.

A lot of friends disappear after a breakup. Misery may love company, but company doesn't usually love misery. You become a leper—people don't want to catch your unhappiness. You should wear a bell to warn the healthy of your approach.

I gave Roberto twenty minutes before I called back.

"It's still very much pending," he said. "I don't think it's going to go anyplace. The only real lead was the car, and nobody could give a good description of it. Nobody got the plate number—which had probably been switched anyway."

"You don't think it was a stolen car—stolen just for this job?"

"Apparently not. They usually turn up later."

"What about the medical and ballistics information?"

"Three slugs in the chest and stomach. Any one of them could have been fatal. They were 9 millimeter shorts. No cartridge cases left at the scene."

"Professional?" I asked.

"Almost anybody could have got that grouping at that distance," Roberto said.

"Motive?"

"Not a one that they could turn up. Weird case."

"People say her son Orlando is an *atorrante*. Did they check on him?"

"Ah, the famous Chucho. Yes, but it didn't lead them anywhere. He was already in our files—brought in twice for questioning. Once in connection with a stolen TV and once in connection with a prostitute working the street in Santurce. In the first instance, they didn't feel they had enough to bring charges that would stick. In the second, they didn't bother—just tried to scare him, told him to get her off the streets."

"Sounds like quite a guy. What address does the file have for him?"

"A dive in Santurce." He read it to me. "Take your brass knuckles if you're going to that neighborhood," Roberto said.

"I think I'll take my gun instead," I said. "When are we going to get together for a drink?"

"Friday happy hour?" Roberto suggested.

"I'll give you a call," I said.

"If you solve the Vega shooting for us, I'll buy you a drink," Roberto said.

I thanked him lavishly and hung up.

*

I ate veal and potatoes at the Berliner and then drove down Condado into Santurce. The address Roberto had given me was in the sleaziest part of town, on Fernandez Juncos between Labra and Cerra, which bounded a pretty ritzy section called Miramar. When the shopping malls sounded the knell for downtown, Miramar got undesirable neighbors. The area was full of stores with SE VENDE signs, the kind of bars that reminded you of old Thomas Gomez movies, street-walkers, drug pushers, and addicts. I drove through slowly while eyes on the sidewalks followed me dispassionately. They were wondering whether I was after drugs or a woman. The women were wearing items like tight silver hotpants or red-toreadors slashed down the side. Their makeup was neo-Fellini. I saw two prowl cars as I prowled myself. I saw a drunk running down the street without any pants.

Eventually I spotted it: a weathered wooden sign that said Superior Hotel on a second floor over a bar. Without the light from the bar, I would never have seen it. I parked, put on all my security devices, and hoped my tires would still be there when I got back.

There were four guys in the bar, all of whom watched me as I started up the narrow stairs beside the bar entrance. On the second floor cement "terrace," three doors faced the street. They were close together, separated by single, metal-louvered windows, and numbered 11, 22, and 33. Cute. All the doors were shut, and the place seemed deserted. I banged on the door of 22, which was supposed to be Chucho Medina's address of record. There was no reply. I hadn't expected any. I was just going through the form.

I tried the door. It was locked. It looked as if I could knock it in with one good push from my shoulder. Instead, I decided to go downstairs and jaw with the boys in the bar.

All of them had their pants on. Two were drinking beer and a third what looked like rum on the rocks. The bartender was a grizzled guy in his fifties whose shirt had once been white. He eyed me as if I were a four-month-old litter box and waited for me to talk.

"Palo Viejo en las rocas," I said.

He grabbed the bottle of white rum from the lineup in front of his fly-specked mirror and poured. He shoved the glass across the rutted wood bar.

I passed him a five and he made me change from a cash register some antique collector would have killed for. The drink was cheap.

The place was very peaceful; nobody was talking. Everybody was too busy looking at me. The other three were all under thirty.

"I'm looking for a guy who's supposed to live upstairs," I said. "Old friend of mine: Chucho Medina."

More silence. I sipped my drink, wondering what sort of microbes had colonized my glass.

Finally the bartender opened his mouth: "He moved."

"Oh? When?"

He thought about that. "Almost a month ago."

His Spanish had an accent. Dominican?

"Would you know where he moved to?"

He shrugged his meaty shoulders. One of the young guys opened up: "Chucho moves a lot."

"I see," I said. "Who would know where to locate him?"

"Ask the *putas*," he said, snickering, then added: "*ca-marón*."

"I'm not a cop," I said. "I'm a private investigator working for his aunt."

I pulled out one of my cards and handed it to him. The other two took it in.

"What does his aunt want investigated?" the snickerer asked.

"I can't say that; confidentiality." I finished my drink. "Nobody knows where Chucho might be?"

Another of the drinkers, a burly guy in a chartreuse tank top, gestured out the door. "Tito's right: ask the girls. They'd be as likely to know as anybody."

"All right," I said. "Thanks." I walked out of the hot bar into the hot street. Early October, and still hovering around the nineties.

I looked up and down Fernandez Juncos. In either direction the scenery looked the same. It didn't seem to make any difference which way I went. I walked east.

I talked to three girls in as many blocks. All of them knew Medina, but none knew where he was now. I left my card with them and asked that they give me a ring if they heard anything or if he showed up again. I intimated that there would be something in it for them.

A fourth girl, a Dominican in her late twenties, said she had heard that Chucho was operating in Isla Verde these days.

"Operating what?"

"The same thing he operated here," she said. "I hear he has

a string of *cachés*—expensive prostitutes. Mostly *ilegales*.”

Like yourself, I thought.

“Have you got a cigarette?” she asked kittenishly. She was slim and nice-featured, and not as hard-looking as most. She could almost pull off kittenish.

“I gave them up,” I said.

“I wish I could,” she said seriously.

I thought she had odd priorities.

“Well, thanks for the information,” I said. “I’ll try Isla Verde.”

She watched me as I turned back to my car. All four of the prostitutes had behaved pretty nicely once they realized I wasn’t a cop.

I decided to punch the clock for that day.

Later that night I dug out my old fishing lures and looked them over. Some were collector’s items, I guessed—wooden plugs I’d bought as a kid. They brought back good memories, memories of a time when life had been firmer. The Chinese have a proverb:

If you wish to be happy for one hour, get intoxicated.

If you wish to be happy for three days, get married.

If you wish to be happy for eight days, kill your pig and eat it.

If you wish to be happy forever, learn to fish.

Well, the freshwater fishing in Puerto Rico wasn’t worth a damn, alcohol wasn’t doing its job very well, and I’d tried marriage.

I figured it was about time for me to go out and buy a pig.

It was close to ten o’clock when I opened my eyes the next morning. I couldn’t remember when I’d last slept that late. After fried eggs and coffee, I telephoned Maria and told her not to expect me at the office—I was going to Isla Verde to chase a lead.

“I’ve typed up the stuff on that divorce settlement case,” she said. “I’ll leave it on your desk.”

“Any important calls?”

“No,” she said. “Not even any unimportant ones.”

I heard her break an air bubble in her chewing gum.

“If a Sra. Vega calls, tell her I’ll get back to her later today,” I said.

“I made brownies last night,” Maria said. “I’ll leave some next to the coffee maker.”

I said I appreciated that and rang off. Although I really wasn’t crazy about brownies, Maria thought I was, and so I’d been pretending for years.

As I walked into the bedroom for my wallet and car keys, the phone started ringing.

"Carlos Bannon here."

"How nice," a male voice said.

"Who is this?"

"I hear you're looking for Chucho Medina," said the male voice.

"That's right."

"Well, stop looking."

"Why? Are you him?"

"No. Stop looking, Bannon. It wouldn't be good for your health. Take my word for it."

"I'm sure your word is as good as gold," I said.

"It's at least as good as lead," he said. Clever son of a bitch.

"I don't feel like being scared today," I said. "Try me tomorrow."

"For you there may not be any tomorrow," he said. I heard a click, and the dial tone came on.

I didn't think he had been bluffing, although you never could tell. I figured he was my elusive Chucho. More than ever I wanted to get a look at the weasely little twerp.

Isla Verde is our second most important tourist strip after the Condado. I remember when it consisted of two hotels and little else—that was back in the sixties. Now it's a seemingly endless row of hotels and

condos, fronted by fast-food restaurants, bars, and a twenty-four-hour traffic jam. I generally think of it as a fine place to avoid.

In most of Puerto Rico we don't have rules any more. Everyone pretty much does what he pleases, be it running red lights or selling crack in schoolyards. Sunday's San Juan *Star* had reported thirty-seven holdups in twenty-four hours in San Juan. Sixteen of them were carjackings. Four were holdups in restaurants. Nowadays restaurants lock their doors; you have to tell them Joe sent you. But it's somewhat different in the tourist areas. Here they care about what happens. So in Isla Verde you didn't see the gilded goddesses of gaiety standing on street corners. If Chucho Medina was running a string of girls here, they would be operating in a much more sophisticated manner: word-of-mouth, telephones, connections through cab drivers and hotel staff. It wouldn't be easy to run him down here.

I parked in the lot of the Sands Hotel and went in to have a drink. It cost five times what it had cost in the Santurce dive the night before. The bar was nearly empty. The bartender was a middle-aged, *simpático*-looking type with a greying mustache.

"Pretty quiet in here," I remarked.

"It picks up after lunch," he said. "Where're you from?"

"Boston," I lied.

"I've never been there," he said.

"Where does a guy find some action here?" I asked innocently.

"What kind of action?" he asked.

"You know, like women."

"San Juan is full of women," he said.

"I don't have that much time," I said.

"Oh," he said, "you're in a hurry." He didn't sound so sympathetic any more.

"You know how it is," I said.

"I've heard it before," he allowed. "But I'm afraid I can't help you."

"Who can?" I asked affably.

"Try the bars outside," he suggested.

"Any particular one?"

"You're the tourist," he said.

"Just follow your—" and here he surprised me with a vulgarity.

I got up and left a tip on the bar. He ignored the tip, and he ignored me as I walked out. I guess I had disappointed him.

A cacophony of car horns, sirens, and loudspeakers greeted me on the street. Another political caravan. This one was for a gubernatorial candidate. He

too had his catchy musical jingle. People were hanging out of car windows ecstatically waving blue and white flags. Others, lined along the sides of the street, waved flags back. Some of the flags along the sides were red and white; their wavings were often accompanied by colorful language. The din was unbelievable. I worked my way through the crowd and the cars to the other side and started west.

My attempts at casual inquiry in the first two bars produced nothing except the impression that one guy I talked to, a slick young man who couldn't live too far from the rackets, knew who Chucho was but wasn't talking. The third bar I encountered was a low-roofed open-fronted place with a U-shaped counter and half a dozen rickety tables. A quartet of ancient ceiling fans added to the atmosphere. It was lunchtime, and the place was busy serving precooked food out of deep steel warming trays. It looked like the kind of fare that would sit on my stomach like Alaska crude on Prince William Sound.

I installed myself toward the back of the U and waited for one of the pair behind it to come over. Eventually one did, a gaunt young woman with short straight hair and staring eyes

behind thick lenses. She had the look of someone who was either a born-again Christian or an axe murderer. She reminded me of a terrifying math teacher I'd had in grammar school. Already permanent lines of disapproval had begun to score her forehead. I half expected her to smash my fingers with a ruler.

"What's yours?" she asked in English.

"*Café puertorriqueño con leche,*" I said.

She nodded wisely as if she clearly saw all the sins of my past. "Anything to eat?"

"Not right now."

She moved off quickly—businesslike. A man slid onto the ripped stooltop beside me. He was puffing a cigarette, releasing contented strings of smoke through hairy nostrils. He chinned toward the lean waitress-bartender: "*Se parece a una monja,*" he remarked. She looks like a nun.

"*St,*" I agreed. "*Una tipa rara.*" An unusual type.

There was a roar of voices from up the street. I'd walked far enough down that at least you could hear yourself speak.

"*Yo estoy cansado de la política,*" he said. I'm tired of all the politics by now.

"I'm tired of it all the time," I said. "You live around here?"

He said he did and offered me a cigarette. The nun returned

with my cup of coffee. I asked if she was from Puerto Rico. She said she wasn't, but she'd been living here for four years. The guy next to me ordered fried chicken, rice, and salad.

I noticed the nun did it all from memory. I imagined that head of hers could juggle five or six orders without dropping a ball. She flew off to another customer while the guy beside me wondered aloud if she was a virgin.

"You never can tell," I said, "she may be an entirely different person when she's not working."

His brown face wrinkled with a knowing grin. "I'm forty-five years old, and I'm not fooled too often," he said. He suddenly returned to politics: "Who are you voting for?"

"I'm not planning to vote."

"They say Pedro will win, but Victoria is showing greater strength in this last week," he offered.

"I find it hard to become concerned," I said. This time I switched the subject on him: "I'm looking for a friend of mine. Haven't seen him for a while. I heard he moved down here from Santurce."

"Perhaps I know him," he said.

"His name is Orlando Medina. We call him Chucho."

"Sí, I know him," he replied immediately. He described Medina to me quite accurately. Then he added warily: "Are you sure you're a friend of his?"

"He'll want to see me," I said.

"I'll go get him" he said. "I know where I can probably find him at this time of day."

"I'll come with you."

"No, you wait here."

"What about your food?"

"Tell her to hold it until I get back," he said.

He wasn't gone thirty seconds before the woman came over to ask what was going on. I told her he'd be returning. She frowned a little more deeply than usual and moved to another customer. He ordered a margarita, and she mixed it very quickly and expertly with a generous amount of tequila. Somehow this did not surprise me.

In fifteen minutes my new-found acquaintance was back. But he was alone.

"You couldn't locate him," I said.

"No, no, I found him. He's out back."

"What do you mean out back? Why is he out back?"

He leaned toward me. His breath was foul. "Chucho thinks someone may be after him. He's keeping a very low profile."

"Why doesn't he think I'm that someone?"

"I described you to him. He said it was all right."

"So how do I get out back?"

"Just go through that door," he pointed. "There's a small yard."

I thanked him and walked out through the metal door he'd pointed to. I found myself in a cement area full of trash. The more fetid trash was piled in plastic cans towards the street. At first, in the bright light, I didn't see anybody. Then I noticed a tall figure to my left against the building. It wasn't Chucho Medina. This guy was a monster who must have weighed two hundred fifty pounds. His muscles bulged under a tight black T-shirt. In his right hand he carried a black crowbar that looked small in that company. I didn't wait for introductions, but he caught me anyway. He got me across the left ribs hard enough to knock me off my feet. As I was scrambling up, struggling to breathe, he hit me grazingly across the left forearm. If he'd connected solidly, he would have snapped the arm. All of this was incredibly fast and incredibly quiet, as if in a dream. I was running and gagging for breath and not even knowing what direction I was going. I just wanted to get away from

that crowbar. I must have run almost two blocks before I looked back and realized he wasn't behind me—which made sense. But I hadn't been in the frame of mind for reasonable thinking.

The pain seemed everywhere. I knew I needed repairs badly; the problem was working up the guts to return to the Sands where I'd left the car. All I wanted to do was get out of Isla Verde to a doctor I knew in Rio Piedras.

That and have a cigarette.

But I didn't take one. The doctor, a discreet friend of mine whose parents had come from Haiti, diagnosed two cracked ribs and a badly bruised and swollen forearm. He bandaged the ribs tightly and told me it would be a question of time. I said I knew: I'd had cracked ribs before.

I took the rest of that day off. I lay on my sofa and drank two six-packs of cold beer. I didn't call Sra. Vega. After dark, I went out on my balcony, raised my hurricane-tattered awning, and looked over the lights of Rio Piedras. I lifted my eyes to a hazy half-moon but no stars. There were no stars over San Juan.

What an ass I'd been.

In the morning the pain felt

worse, my body as stiff as my stupidity. But I managed to get down to the office by ten thirty through a drizzly rain. Maria was pouring herself a cup of coffee from our handy dandy coffee maker. "Pour one for me," I said.

"You must have had a night," she said. "You look like something the cat wouldn't even bother to drag in."

"It wasn't one of my best." Why upset her with the details? "Did Sra. Vega call?"

"No."

I took the coffee she extended and carried it to my inner office. I eased my stiff torso into my swivel chair and glanced over the list of calls staring up at me from the desktop. The buzzer of the street door sounded, and Maria pushed the release. I saw a nattily dressed man in his thirties come through the door. He didn't look familiar.

While he talked to Maria, I caught the name Medina. "Send him in," I called.

He didn't wait for further invitation. He looked just as his aunt had described him: short and stocky with a neatly trimmed black mustache and fashionably coiffed hair. With his puffy, pleated slacks and black rayon jacket he suggested a nineties version of *Mi-*

ami Vice. There was gold on his neck and fingers.

"Chucho Medina," I said without getting up.

I gestured him to the chair on the other side of the desk. "Sit down."

He sat down. "I got your card," he said. "I heard you were looking for me." He pulled out a pack of Marlboros.

"No Smoking area," I said curtly.

He put the cigarettes back in his pocket, slowly. I opened the bottom drawer of my desk and took out my Browning BDA .380. I checked to see if it was fully loaded.

"What the hell's going on?" Chucho Medina said. His voice quavered slightly.

I snapped the gun's magazine back. "People are chasing me with steel crowbars," I said. "I figure I'd better be more careful. But you wouldn't know anything about that."

"No," he said, trying to sound angry and sincere.

"And you wouldn't know anything about a phone call warning me to stop looking for you."

"No," he said again. "If I'd made a call like that, why would I be here?"

"I was wondering the same thing."

"I guess it's mainly curiosity," he said. "People tell me a

private eye is asking about me. I have to be curious."

"Suppose we attend to my curiosity first," I suggested. "Who tried to put me out with the crowbar?"

"I have no idea," Medina said. I could tell he was lying. "When was this?"

"Yesterday morning in Isla Verde. A guy I talked to said he knew you and he'd go get you. Instead he set me up for a muscle-man with a crowbar."

"What did the first guy look like?"

I described him.

Chucho said, "I don't know him."

This time I couldn't tell if he was lying or not. What I could tell was that he was scared. He was getting more scared every minute.

"All of this has something to do with your mother's death," I said. "That's where I come in. Your aunt hired me to look into it."

"It was a mistake," Chucho said. "It must have been. She was mistaken for someone else."

Was he trying to convince me or himself? He pulled out his cigarettes again, then remembered and nervously returned them to his breast pocket. I twirled the gun on the desk.

"Somebody murders your mother, you disappear from

Santurce, I try to find you and somebody calls to threaten me, and then I'm actually attacked while making inquiries about you. What do you make of all this?" I asked him.

"I—I don't know," he said. Lying again.

"Oh, you know. Why did you disappear from your haunts in midtown?"

"I just felt it was time to move," he said lamely.

"Don't you *care* who murdered your mother?" I shot at him.

"I *care*," he shouted back. "But there's nothing anyone can do. Not you, not anybody."

"You don't care a whole hell of a lot, you slimy pimp."

He was out of his chair in an instant. I snatched up the Browning and steadied it on his midsection. He rolled off a string of epithets in Spanish that was impressive, even from the mouth of a slimy pimp. He was probably nearing the end of the list when the two gunshots came. They came through my side street window, and Chucho suddenly stopped in midword, his face frozen, and then slowly collapsed on the floor between my desk and his chair.

There was a screech of car tires and I ran for the window. A large black American car—it looked like a Cadillac or an

Oldsmobile—was speeding off toward the lagoon. I caught the first three letters of the plate before it turned the corner: CRZ. I turned back to Chucho Medina. He was still breathing, clutching his chest, dark blood welling up around his beringed fingers. Maria was at my office door, a look of shocked dismay on her face. "Call an ambulance," I yelled.

"The bastard," Chucho Medina said with difficulty.

"Which bastard?" I said. "Who was it?"

"Paco," he said. At least it sounded like Paco.

"Paco who?" I yelled.

He said another word—it sounded like "son"—and then he went altogether limp in the way they do when it's over. I checked anyway. I even tried Maria's purse mirror under his nose.

"Well, there's no hurry on the ambulance," I told her. "You'd better call the police as well."

Maria looked as if she wanted to cry but was too numbed for the tears to come.

I didn't know any of the cops who spent the next couple of hours in my office. I told them everything I'd learned—why not? Having a murder on my premises made me very uncomfortable. When

they were finally through, Maria went home, and I cleaned up as best I could. I called a handyman I knew about the broken window; he said he'd be right down. Then I called Sra. Vega.

She was shocked by the news of her nephew's death, but I could tell that it wouldn't take her too long to get over it. She seemed more concerned about the danger to me. I said I could take care of myself—something I was beginning very much to doubt—and asked her if she knew anyone named Paco. She thought on that for a while and finally said that there was only one Paco she could think of. When she told me who it was, I saw the first glimmer of light in a very murky case. There was no way I could have made the connection myself, but now that it had been made, it seemed somehow fitting and right.

By two o'clock my office window was fixed, and I locked up the place and drove over to the Motor Vehicles Bureau in Isla Grande. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still grey.

For years I'd had a contact in the registration section named Sara, a plump, pleasant woman in her early fifties who still insisted on dying her hair copper red. She was an outrageous flirt, but I managed to keep my

defenses intact. I found her at her desk behind a pile of application forms.

"*Carlos, querido!*" she cried as I planted a kiss on her powdered cheek.

"How have you been, Sarita?" I asked.

"Oh, all right," she said. "I could use a little more love in my life." She eyed me coquettishly.

"I'd have thought you had more than you could handle."

"Oh, I could handle quite a lot," she said naughtily. "But you didn't come here to flirt with me." Pout. "You always come on business."

"Let's say both," I returned.

She smiled. "Well, what is the business?"

"I want to know if any car with a license plate beginning CRZ is registered to Paco Arana or to anyone connected with him."

She whistled softly. "Are you becoming interested in politics?"

"Only peripherally."

"Why do you want to know this?"

"I can't tell you. You'll have to trust me."

"I must search for this on the computer. It may take a while." She lifted herself from her cushioned seat. "Have some coffee." She pointed to their machine.

I said I would as she disappeared through a door at the back of the office.

There wasn't much left in the coffee maker. I took what there was and cut it with canned milk and sugar. The other women working in the office pretended to ignore me while they looked me over. One of them was new. It was almost twenty minutes before Sara returned.

"Here's a list of all the *tabillas* beginning with those three letters," she said quietly, handing me the printout. There were only nine entries on it. "None of them is the person you mentioned," she added. "And none of them seems connected with the person you mentioned."

I studied the list but received no sudden flashes of enlightenment.

"Not surprising," I said. "I thought it was probably a phony plate number, but I had to go through the motions. Anyway, I may be way out in left field on this one."

"I hope you are," Sara said. "It looks like he's going to win."

"Is that right. What do you know about him?"

"Let's go out in the hall," she said.

The hall was full of people carrying forms and scurrying here and there wondering

which line they should get in next. You don't just get in one line at Motor Vehicles—they make life more diverting than that. They're in the entertainment industry.

"Arana is considered a frontrunner because this is the year everybody is talking about a change," Sara said. "He is a new face that the people are not yet disenchanted with. And he has the advantage of coming from humble beginnings. People like that. All his life he's been associated with Santiago Iglesias urbanization, which, as you know, is hardly *rico*. He went through the public schools but managed to get into the university and eventually through law school. People like that."

"A regular Horatio Alger type," I said. "And if he gets into the Senate, it'll be chauffeur-driven government cars, all-expense trips, and just about every other frill you can think of. They live well."

"It's our own fault," Sara said. "We let them get away with it."

"I agree." I leaned down and kissed her again on the cheek, a little moist now in the un-air-conditioned hall. "Thanks a million, Sarita. Take care of yourself."

"And you, Carlos. Don't be a stranger."

I fought my way out through the short-tempered crowd of would-be registrants. If they didn't finish the process by three thirty, they'd have to come back the next day. The government keeps bankers' hours.

I drove back to my office and telephoned Sra. Vega, who was home as I'd expected. Also as I'd expected, she knew where Paco Arana's campaign headquarters were located: a small office building on Paz Granela, only two blocks from her house. I dodged her curiosity and said I'd call again later.

It was just after three. I thought I'd feel more comfortable poking around after dark, so I dialed Roberto Burgos' office, where another detective told me he was off duty until eight that evening. I dialed his home, and he picked it up on the first ring.

"It's Social Friday, Roberto. What about that drink?"

"Fine with me," he said, "but I can't overdo it; I go on duty at eight."

"I wasn't planning to overdo it. The Berliner all right?"

"I'll meet you there at four. By the way," he added, "what have you come up with on the Awilda Vega killing?"

"I don't want to talk about it now. Tomorrow maybe."

"Is something happening tonight?" he asked.

"Maybe."

"You're getting awfully cagy, Carlos."

I hung up and strapped on my Browning, covering it with a lightweight jacket.

When I got to the German restaurant, it was already full of modishly dressed upper-middle types who were taking optimum advantage of happy hour. The crowd was younger than I was, but I liked the Berliner's European atmosphere: exposed rafters, decorative beer steins, fat pink-cheeked barmaids in snowy aprons. One of them mixed me a margarita straight up while I waited for Roberto and ogled the pretty women like a moonstruck adolescent. It had been a while.

Roberto arrived ten minutes late. He stuck to beer, and we talked about pretty women. He said his wife had been very pretty when he married her, but that twenty years had taken their toll. He would show me an early photo sometime. A guy on our left, in his late thirties and very drunk, said that beautiful women made him want to cry. I imagined that in his state a lot of things made him want to cry. I said that I could think of better things to do with a beautiful woman. He said someday a beautiful

woman would make me want to cry. I said that had already happened. Roberto said we should move to a table in the back room. We left the romantic drunk next to a noisy group of *viernes social* yuppies. There were a couple of women there who might have made the drunk want to cry.

At six we ordered German sausages and sauerkraut, and I switched to beer. The noise level at the table next to us was rising with each round. So was the number in the group. At seven thirty Roberto said he had to leave. I signaled for the tab, and both of us still commendably sober, we walked out to our cars. I headed mine south in the direction of Santiago Iglesias.

The roads were heavy with traffic—people going home after their Friday drinking or going out to do some. The driving was just what you'd expect. Once I came within a hair of being rear-ended. But I made it to Paz Granela.

You couldn't miss the campaign headquarters. There were party flags all over the building and signs with Arana's name in letters four feet high. The windows on all three floors were lighted. The place had a festive air about it. A lot of cars were parked in front, some on the sidewalk. Among

them stood clots of people gabbing with plastic cups in their hands.

I couldn't find any nearby parking and had to settle for a spot nearly a block away. Nobody took any special notice of me as I sauntered into the building. I continued straight down the main hall toward a door marked ESTACIONAMIENTO at the back and pushed through into the parking area. Almost all of the first floor was parking space, open at the rear so that car thieves would have easy access. The place was lit with feeble fluorescent bulbs. I strolled along the rows of parked cars.

It had not been outside, and there was no good reason to think it would be here either, but I'm occasionally an optimist. And this time optimism paid off: a black American car exactly like the one I'd seen outside my office except that the license plate was wrong; it started with DXO. The car was an Oldsmobile Regency Ninety-eight with windows almost as dark as its paint. I knelt down to examine the plate more closely. At the sides were two small metal clips. I fiddled with them, and eventually the plate came out in my hand. It wasn't screwed to the car but to another plate behind. The CRZ on it jumped out at me. By re-

leasing the two clips, you could reverse the plate in seconds.

I was straightening up, feeling quite satisfied with myself, when I heard a voice very close behind me say, "Put them up."

I turned slowly, my hands rising, and saw two men, one tall and one short. Both of them had guns trained on me. The tall man was the one who'd set me up for the monster with the crowbar in Isla Verde.

"What are you doing around the car, friend?" he asked affably.

"Nothing," I said. I was all out of witty rejoinders.

"Pat him down," he said to the shorter man.

That produced my Browning .380. The little guy hefted it expertly—seemed to like the feel of it.

"Now let's go upstairs, Mr. Bannon," said the big man, waving his gun barrel toward a lighted exit sign to his right.

We climbed a badly lit emergency staircase, freshly painted in a revolting shade of grey. On the third floor, the little guy opened the hall door, checked the hall, and then waved us across and into an office that I at first thought was empty.

Only after some seconds did I realize there was a man sitting quietly at a desk to the side of the door.

"Mr. Arana," I said.

He was in his shirtsleeves, pen in hand; he regarded me with considerable puzzlement.

"We found him checking out the Olds," the little man explained. "He removed the plate."

"Ah, that's too bad," Arana said. Although it was the end of the day, he looked as fresh as if he'd just got up: crisp striped shirt, paisley tie, carefully combed hair. I could smell his cologne from where I stood.

"Bannon?" Arana asked the Mutt and Jeff team.

"The same," said the little man. "A good private detective."

"Unfortunately," said the politician. He studied me with interest. "Haven't we met before?"

"You have a politician's memory," I said. "We shook hands a couple of days ago. But I don't think I'll vote for you."

"I don't think so either," Arana said. He addressed his two thugs: "Well, we'll have to get rid of him."

"Meanwhile do you mind if I take down my hands?" I asked.

"No, go ahead," he said indifferently. He turned to the tall man. "Take him out of town. Somewhere deserted, like out toward Dorado. Remove his identification."

It gave me a funny feeling to be spoken of in the third person.

"I tried to warn you off, Mr. Bannon. Twice. Even a crowbar wasn't enough to convince you."

"If it's any consolation, I've got two cracked ribs to show for my stubbornness."

"If that's all, Chispito must be losing his touch," Arana said.

"Satisfy my curiosity on one point," I said, trying to stall for time, trying to figure out how I was going to get out of this one—if I was going to get out of this one. "Why did you have the old woman killed?"

He sat down in his chair, leaned his well-groomed head back against the leather. "It was years ago," he said. "I was twenty-one. Chucho and I were trafficking junk in this barrio. None of the buyers knew we were behind it: we never got down to street level. The only person outside our organization who knew was Chucho's mother. She found a big cache of snow in his room, and he blurted out the whole story. Since he was in it up to his ugly ears, she didn't do anything except to make him pull out.

"But she knew, and she didn't like me. She could blow my election chances sky high. I couldn't take the chance. Too much of that kind of thing happening these days." He stretched his arms above his

head as if weary from his busy day. "I just played it safe. Chucho would be no problem—he was too much of a coward and involved in too many deals himself. But then *you* got to Chucho, and he became a potential danger, too."

Arana pulled out a fancy cigarette case, lifted one, and lit it. It smelled a lot better than his cologne. "Now you're the only one who represents a danger, Mr. Bannon."

Suddenly there was a hubbub in the hall and the door flew open and eight or ten people crowded into the room waving bottles and cups. They were celebrating their candidate's election a little prematurely. But just on time for me, as I dived into the midst of them, knocking one young lady to the floor while others released some choice expletives, and then I was through them and out into the hall and through the stairwell door. I was down those ugly grey steps so fast that at one point I thought I'd lose my footing and take them like a tumbleweed.

There were clusters of people in the downstairs hall and more out front, but I didn't concern myself with appearances. I ran like a rat on a sinking ship until I'd reached my car, which seemed to be parked on another planet.

I'd never got the car started so fast. As I squealed around a tight U-turn, I saw Arana's two henchmen running in my direction. They didn't even bother to fire.

Roberto sat across his desk from me drinking black coffee. He was a good listener. As it all came out, he seemed at first surprised, then patient, then surprised again. But he didn't interrupt until I was finished.

"This is strong stuff, Carlos. Have you got any evidence that would hold up in court?"

"No," I admitted, "but probably a match could be made between the bullets that killed Chucho and his mother and the guns of Arana's thugs."

"I imagine those guns are already at the bottom of San Juan Bay," said Roberto.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know exactly. One thing is certain: I'm not going to let Arana get elected."

But that didn't turn out to be a problem. When Roberto and several other cops went over to Arana's campaign headquarters a little later, neither he nor

his gunmen were anywhere to be found. A visit to his condominium apartment also came up negative. Roberto thought he'd taken off, and this proved to be correct. People at the airport confirmed that Arana had boarded a nine forty-five plane to Venezuela. Followup calls to Venezuela revealed that he'd boarded another international flight there.

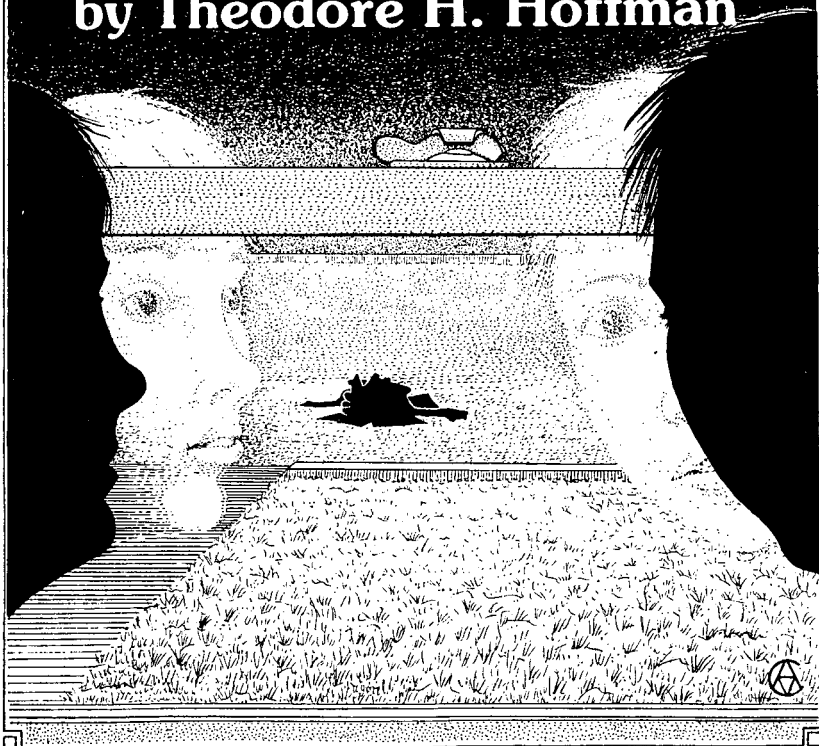
The long and short of it was that Arana disappeared like a pebble in a pond. He never surfaced again. His party had a hell of a time trying to explain why their candidate was no longer in the race—particularly since they themselves didn't know. Roberto philosophized that perhaps it was all for the best, because we never could have got the kind of evidence to bring before a grand jury.

The morning after my foot-race with death, I drove over to Sra. Vega's house. Maybe just knowing the truth does people some good, even if nothing can be done about it. I don't know.

I had to buy a new gun for my office drawer.

SOMETHING BLACK

by Theodore H. Hoffman



“Hey,” said Zack, looking out the window into the night. “What the hell’s that?”
Theron, scrunched into a near-fetal position on his bed, looked up from the Hulk. “What’s what?”

“Somethin’ out there. C’mere, man, I’m serious.”

Theron rolled upright and tossed aside the comic book. He pushed to his feet and padded toward the window.

"What, man?" Theron took his place behind Zack, looking around the taller boy's shoulder, gripping it softly for balance.

"Just look, can't you see it? Look down there in the road. Jesus H. Kee-rist, what the hell is that?"

Squinting through Zack's reflection in the second story window, Theron looked.

It was something, all right. Lying a few feet from the end of the driveway, black and moundy, in a blind spot between street lights. Something unmoving.

"Jesus, Zack," Theron said very softly. "Is that a man?"

He felt his breathing deepen, the muscles in Zack's shoulder tighten, and the window fogged as Zack strained toward it.

Then: "I think maybe it is, Ther," and Zack looked at him, voice rising. "Jesus, I think it is, man!"

He looked back, eyes wide and eager. The something didn't move, the something that was black and looked more and more like a human body huddled and dead in the street.

"Hey, come on, that can't be a body," said Theron, trying to ease his breathing. "I mean, why would some guy just be lying in the street?"

"Hell, maybe he got hit by a car or something. Look at 'im, Ther, that's a *man*. Jesus H. Kee-rist!"

Next door, Von Trapp, the Jamesons' German shepherd, started barking. Maybe at the shapes of the boys in the upstairs window, maybe at the black something in the street. Theron stepped from Zack, reached to the top of the dresser for his inhaler. He caught himself about to call his mother, only there was no mother, no father, just the two boys at opposite ends of twelve, alone in the house. Mom and Dad were out there somewhere, talking to that lawyer person. He glanced at Zack, who was unconsciously rubbing his thighs rhythmically, then Theron closed his eyes and raised the inhaler to his mouth. At the hiss, Zack's head turned.

"Hey, you okay, Theron? You sure? Look," Zack said, spreading his hands helplessly, "we gotta make sure. If that is a man, then probably we got to call the cops. Look, if you want to sit here, you know, catch your breath, cool. I gotta go the hell out there." Zack pounded Theron on the back and was out the bedroom door and bolting down the hall, with Theron scurrying to catch up, "Wait!," fingers tight on the inhaler, running past his mother's room, past the bathroom, past his father's room, "Wait a minute, Zack!," watching Zack take the stairs two at a time, Theron running a

hand down the smooth wooden banister as he descended stepstep-stepstep, "Stop, man!"

"What?" said Zack, barely winded, poised at the front door. Theron left the last step behind him and hurried over the plush carpet.

"Just, hold it, a minute," said Theron as he bent at the waist, gasping. The pressure in his chest wasn't too bad, and he concentrated on what the doctor had told him about taking control of himself. He felt moist under his sweatshirt, and he could see Zack's foot tapping impatiently. "I'm, all right, I just think, we should take a minute, to figure, this thing out."

"Figure what out, Ther?" The foot stopped tapping, planted itself. "There's a body in the road, right? Let's just—"

"Please," said Theron, straightening, "All I'm saying is, that we should maybe, make sure it *is* a body." He wiped his nose with the back of his hand, the inhaler brushing his nostril. "Come on, Zack. What can it hurt?"

Zack drew in a deep breath. "Oh for Kee-rist's sake," he said after a moment. "So what the hell do *you* think we should do?"

The tone of the voice made Theron wince. The hand with the inhaler slunk behind his back. "I just think we should try to get a look at it from down here first, that's all." He felt suddenly small in the foyer, looking up at Zack, the wide living room to his left, the deep dining room to his right, the broad hall to his father's den behind him, the oversized front door before him. And, beyond it, something black in the street.

The hardness in Zack's gaze eased. "Yeah, okay, I guess that makes sense," and he turned and strode to the barred window to the left of the door. He motioned to Theron and drew the curtain aside. "C'mon, Ther. Let's figure out what the hell this thing is."

"Wait a second," said Theron, and he hurried to the phone table. He yanked open the drawer and pulled out the flashlight. "Here, this'll help," and he handed it to Zack.

"Cool. Now let's see what we got here," Zack edged aside to give Theron room at the window.

The different vantage point wasn't much help, but even without the flashlight the boys could see that the thing in the road had bulk. Too long to be a trash bag, too solid to be a cut shrub, and it clearly wasn't an oil stain. Von Trapp barked again, and Zack said, "Too bad it's not ol' Wolfen lying croaked out there," and he laughed as he flicked on the flashlight. For a moment, he shone the light in Theron's eyes, but when he saw the pain on Theron's

face, he swallowed and turned the beam's attention to whatever was lying in the street.

The beam cut through the night, shivering on the vine-choked fence that partially hid the Merricks' house across the street. Theron realized that the black thing couldn't be seen from that house, or from the other fenced-in, barred-in, hedged-in, set-back houses along the cul-de-sac. Certainly not from Zack's house three doors down.

Zack made a displeased sound deep in his throat. The beam bounced around the thing, crisscrossed it, settled, jumped, and settled. "Well—what the hell is it?"

Whatever it was, it really was black. It wasn't just the night that made it look that way. It seemed to absorb the flashlight beam as Zack outlined it; it didn't look like *anything*.

Except, maybe, a man. On his side, curled away from the boys, dressed in some kind of—

"Hey, Ther," whispered Zack, "doesn't your dad have a black coat?"

There was a thin, cracking sound as Theron's hand tightened on the inhaler. For a moment he couldn't breathe at all, and when Zack said, "Hunh, Ther?," Theron could only nod.

The black trenchcoat he and Mom had picked out for Dad last year, the heavy one with the fur lining. The black one Theron had begged his mother to get, not the brown one, and finally she'd relented, and Dad had opened the package and tried to be enthusiastic and said, "Well, it fits, anyway." And it was later that night that Dad and Mom had their first real fight, and it was the trenchcoat that sparked it, and they didn't know that Theron was listening from the top of the stairs. And once the cracks in the marriage appeared, they just got worse and worse, Mom and Dad barking at each other, and Dad refused to let them return the trenchcoat and insisted on wearing it, and a few months later he'd moved into the guest room, and first Mom and Dad went to that counselor, and now it was that lawyer, and there wasn't any shouting any more, just the awful silences.

"Hey, take it easy, Ther, maybe you should sit down or something," said Zack, but the smaller boy shook his head and drew deeply on his inhaler. "Hey, what's wrong? I don't mean it's your dad, Jesus, that's not what I meant, I just thought . . ."

Silence. Because they knew they were both thinking it. Thinking that the black thing was Theron's dad, dead in a pile on the street.

Theron shook his head, fought to calm his lungs. The hyperventilation was making his head spin. He gripped Zack's shoulder to keep from collapsing.

"Look, Ther, it's probably nothing, just, I don't know, some damn thing we haven't thought of. Look, this is stupid. I'm just going out there to check it out."

Theron's eyes snapped open. "No," he managed, but Zack shook his head.

"I gotta. Just stay here, Ther, I'll be back—"

"No, my mom, said we can't, leave, the house, we—"

"Oh Jesus H. Kee-rist, Theron, there's a body in the street! I gotta go out there. Now, you stay here and take it easy—"

"—not supposed to, go outside—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, but man, I don't care what your mom said. I mean, she called *me* to come over, and said I gotta watch out for you, and that's what I'm doing. I'm telling you to go lie down for a minute and I'll just go out there and see who the hell that is and then we can call the cops or whatever. Now, come on, Ther, let me go!" Zack wrenched his T-shirt free of Theron's grasp.

Theron shook his head, slowly gaining control of his breathing. "You can't, go out there, without me, Zack."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because you, don't know the code, that turns off the alarm, and if you open the door, the alarm will go off, and then the police, will come and you'll, get in big trouble."

"Big whoopin' deal, we're going to call the cops anyway—"

"IT'S MY FATHER, ZACK!"

They stood transfixed for a moment, Zack holding the flashlight like a club, Theron taking deep, calming breaths. Outside, behind the stone wall separating the properties, Von Trapp barked. And the thing in the street waited.

Zack relaxed. "Okay. Okay, Ther. Let's both go." Pause. "We both want to know what that thing is. You okay?"

Inhaling deeply, smothering the inhaler with his hand behind his back, Theron nodded. Zack moved to the front door, released the deadbolt, and looked at Theron. Who, shivering slightly, punched in the code on the wall keyboard of the alarm system.

"Okay?"

"Yeah," said Theron, and Zack opened the door.

A cool breeze slipped over them, carrying with it a distant sour-sweet smell. Von Trapp went crazy, his barks climbing the wall between the houses.

"Shut up, you mangy mutt," said Zack, and as he and Theron moved onto the porch, he started to pull the door shut.

"No," said Theron. "Leave it open. In case we need, to get back in quick." Zack looked at him, the flashlight a weapon in his hand. "You know, in case my parents, come back early. We're not supposed, to leave the house. That was the agreement."

Zack shrugged and left the door a foot open. They trod slowly to the end of the porch, frayed socks unable to keep their feet warm. Cool, dry wind, sweeping the leaves in the trees. The nasty, sporadic *zzzix* of insects kamikaziing into the bug light. Far away, the howl of a siren. Von Trapp paused, waiting for any excuse to start barking again, and Theron tried to hold his breath.

The black something lay patiently.

Zack tried to keep the beam on it as the boys took the three steps to the sidewalk that led to the driveway. Theron stayed a step behind him, trying to keep the images in his head from getting too grisly. His father, dead and crushed by the tires of the car, his mother laughing as she sped off, never to return. . . .

"C'mon, man, it'll be okay," said Zack, not looking away from the thing in the street. Von Trapp answered with a volley of barks, and Theron remembered the many times his father had shrieked obscenities at the dog while gardening, swimming in the pool out back, washing the Jag; remembered the time his kite had fallen into the Jamesons' yard, and Von Trapp had shredded it before Theron could pull it back. He switched the inhaler from his left hand to his right in case he had to throw it. He followed Zack toward the black mound in the street.

And suddenly Zack giggled, tried to stifle it, laughed out loud, setting off Von Trapp. Theron started to laugh, too, as the boys crept onto the imported pebbles of the driveway, the thing maybe twenty-five feet away.

"Oo-oo-ooo-ooo!" whispered Zack, like a ghost.

They were giggling uncontrollably now, and Theron couldn't catch his breath. The pebbles squirmed and crunched painfully beneath their besocked feet, and the breeze raised goosebumps, and the darkness pressed in, and Von Trapp was going to be hoarse the next day if he kept this up.

"Jesus, why don't you choke on it, Wolfen," muttered Zack, trying not to laugh. But it was Theron whose fear overcame his laughter first, because they were close now, maybe fifteen feet, and oh Jesus it was his father in that damn coat, dead, crushed, mashed

lifeless and alone, just lying in the street like roadkill.

"Let's go back in and call the police," Theron said.

Zack shook the flashlight "no," the beam crazily scything across the mound, the street, the Merricks' fence. "In a minute, Ther. Hang in there."

Ten feet now. And clear, so clear to Theron, the body of his father, murdered and abandoned right in front of his own house. You couldn't see the head—*oh Jesus, please let there be a head!*—not even the hands or feet; he was doubled over on his side. But it was so clear, and the pebbles hurt, and the barking barking barking was starting to drive him crazy, where the hell were the Jamesons and why didn't they come out to investigate?

Zack was at the end of the driveway and into the street, probing with the flashlight. Tears were in Theron's eyes because his mother, she must have gotten Dad to get out of the car for a minute, and then she was slamming the accelerator to the floor and bearing down on Dad and the *impact* and the car hopping twice like it did over a speed bump and then she took off and left him to die, and Theron to make it on his own.

And as Zack reached for the body, the world faded to black for Theron. There was just him and his father lying dead in the street on a cool night, his best friend holding the flashlight as though to beat in his father's head, because maybe he wasn't dead really, maybe he'd just been lying there, gathering his strength, and when Theron got close enough Dad would twist around and leap to his feet and fly at them with murder in his eyes—

—and a burst of wind slapped at them and his father was turning over, raising an arm against them. Theron gasped a scream, and his father rolled over and fell still again, the outstretched arm pointing directly, accusingly at Theron.

And then Zack said, "God damn it, it's just the coat," and he kicked at it before lifting it by the arm. Von Trapp yelped with frustration and clawed at the wall.

Theron's breath raced, and he could not move. He watched Zack pick up the trenchcoat, a disgusted expression dimly visible on his face. Theron kept looking at the street, as though his father had to be there, and even Zack's burst of laughter and curse at Von Trapp could not break the spell. The inhaler dropped from Theron's hand, clattered on the driveway.

"Well, Jesus H. Kee-rist, what a bunch of crap over a stupid trenchcoat! Your dad probably just left it on top of the car and

forgot it, like he did that one time with his briefcase." Zack clumsily folded the coat over until none of it touched the ground. "Jesus, Ther, I'm glad we didn't call the cops. America's most wanted—your dad's damn coat!" He laughed, shook his head, clicked off the flashlight. He started to walk back toward the house.

Theron said, in a low voice, "Give me the coat."

"Why? C'mon, let's just go back inside, man."

"Give me the coat. Give me the coat, Zack."

Something in Theron's voice made Zack stop, the trenchcoat heavy and bulky in his arms. One of the empty sleeves dangled, swinging in the chilly breeze like a black pendulum. Zack looked to the light shafting from the front door of the house, at the bright light and warm colors inside. He looked at Theron. Von Trapp's claws raked at the wall as he barked.

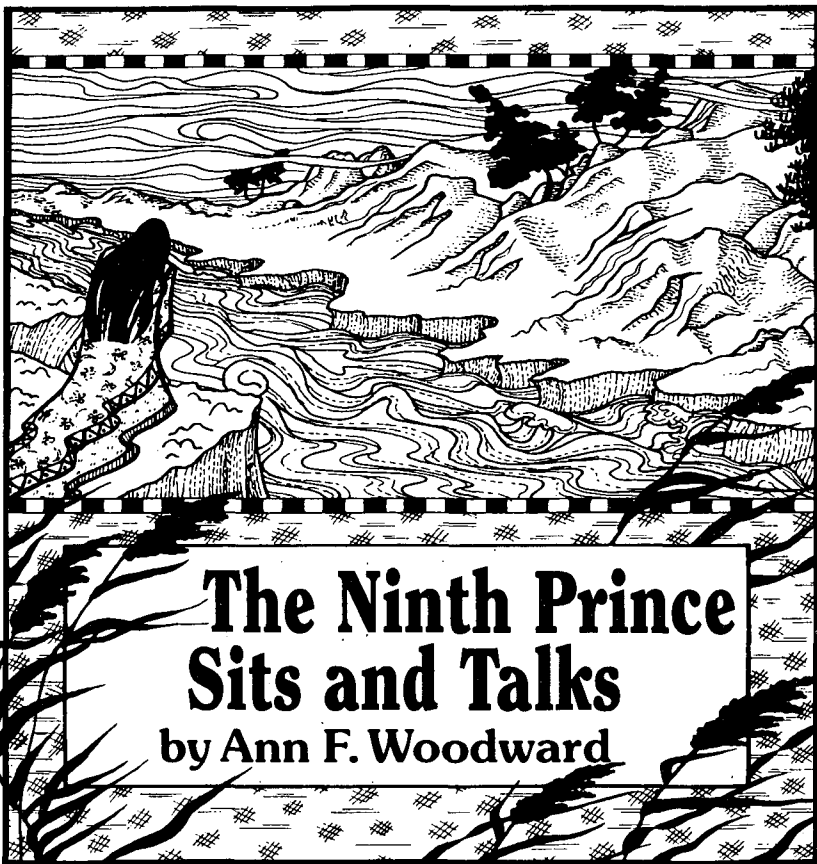
"Jesus, Ther, don't you want to—" but Theron took a step toward him, and Zack held out the coat. Theron struggled to keep it folded over, let it slump between his arms, nodded, and turned. Awkwardly, he walked to the wall separating his yard from the Jamesons'.

"What are you doing, man?" said Zack in a shouted whisper.

Theron stood before the six foot wall, not feeling the chill, not hearing his friend. Just the vicious barks on the other side of the wall. The coat tried to unfurl in the breeze, briefly enshrouding Theron's face. He shook it off, gathered it, and pressed the coat together. As Zack approached from behind, Theron reared back, spun once, and with a breathy roar he flung the coat. It brushed the wall, sleeves flailing, soaring through shadows, landing on top of the wall and holding its balance for just a moment. "Jesus!" said Zack as he pulled up behind Theron, and as Von Trapp launched his warnings, the boys watched the trenchcoat topple over the wall.

Theron looked at the top of the wall for only a moment. He felt Zack's hand on his shoulder. "Jesus, man," Zack said. Theron drew a deep, controlled breath. He turned and walked toward the house, toward the front door, toward light and warmth and safety. The sounds of savagery from the other side of the wall intensified.

"Good dog," said Theron softly, and he was the first in the house, and after Zack was safely inside, Theron closed and locked the door, and waited for his parents to come home.



The Ninth Prince Sits and Talks

by Ann F. Woodward

The river, at Uji, is deep and strong. It flows with sinews of force on its surface, dimpled and rippling with hidden current. Around boulders the water swells and tumbles white, roaring. Fish thrive in its cold depths, and those who catch fish scull warily on its surface, never forgetting the sweeping weight that can take them into the rapids. Past the rapids, where the water shatters, some men fish at the weir, swinging nets into a stilled pool beyond a dam of brush. They work early, rising before dawn. There are sometimes bodies at the weir: the boatman's little son who fell in and was drowned, the young woman whose mother-

in-law tormented her until she threw herself into the water, the old man who had been given a young bride and, foolish with happiness, upset his boat. They take their life from the river, these fishermen at the weir. Sometimes it gives them death.

At the beginning of the Eleventh Month the Lady Aoi traveled to the small temple at Uji. It was a road famous for steepness, obstruction, mist, dampness, and gloom of forest, and a depressingly long distance from the capital, so that when one arrived at the crossing, it was good to have a friend in one of the fine villas that lined the banks. Such friends, hearing who had come, would invite the traveler to spend the night, would offer wine and food, braziers full of hot coals, and comfort for the trials of the journey. This time of year, though, few villas were occupied, and Aoi's task was made easier. She had been sent to see the Ninth Prince, and since he lived here all the year, she was sure of finding shelter in his house. One of the guards went to the gate and soon came back to take her in. The prince's house was on the east bank of the river, so there was no need to engage a boat to reach it.

He came himself to meet her, a small man, walking with his head slanted to the side and as poorly dressed as she remembered him. He cried out with joy on seeing her, though with a mournful face and curiously lifeless inflection.

"Ah, what has brought you along that terrible road at such a time of year? How cold you must be, how exhausted!"

Aoi, carried in a palanquin with O-hana, her maid, and two guards on horseback to accompany them, had not in fact found the way to Uji as much of a trial as it was always said to be. True, the maple leaves had all fallen, and except for the deep-shadowed green of the pines, there had been no color in the woods. But the horses had stepped surely along a wide and well-tamped path, the pines, given voice by the wind, were majestic, she had seen pheasants and rabbits and deer among the trees, and the cold drabness of bare underbrush had seemed appropriate to her errand and had allowed her to harden her spirit. But she said to the prince, "Ah!" and smiled and gathered her skirts around her for warmth; following to a vast bare room.

He sent a scurrying old servant, who raced back and forth bringing cushions, quilts, charcoal, hot water, perfumed towels, mirrors, but it was obvious that before any of these things could be set down the floor must first be discreetly wiped clean of dust. When she joined the prince at last, he was drinking hot wine. He made ner-

vous gestures excusing himself for not waiting, poured for her, and urged her to move nearer to the brazier, stirring the coals to open flame.

"When I last saw you," he said, "how different it was! That perfect summer weather following the rains. We played music half the night, do you remember? There on the moon-viewing platform of my sister-in-law's pavillion."

"How should I ever forget the sound of your flute, rising and falling with such artistry in the still darkness."

Picking up slender bronze fire-chopsticks, he fussed again with the coals to hide the flush of pleasure, looking as if he might weep.

"I was trying so hard," he said, "to come out of mourning. My wife's death, unexpected and sudden as it was . . . I thought I had grown used to sadness, but when the time came to put off somber colors and return to normal life, I was sadder than ever to think that the world expected me to give up grieving. And I found I had no normal life. Most men meet their secretaries and spend some time attending to their duties for the government. They choose their clothes with interest, order beautifully woven belts and painted fans. But I—I had no duties, a rope of hemp would have done to tie up my trousers, and my only fan was ragged at the edges of the paper, the lacquer chipped on the ribs."

Aoi murmured understanding all through these remarks. It was his sister-in-law, the Retired Empress, who had sent her. She had first seen the Ninth Prince when he had been enticed into a visit to the empress's large estate in the city, where it was hoped that a taste of society would cheer him up and ease the end of his year of mourning.

"And then I met that unusually perceptive young woman. Seeing my tears, of which the empress was so impatient," he sniffed and twisted his mouth, "she said—do you remember what she said?" Aoi nodded that she did, but he repeated it anyway. "There is holiness in grief.' Strange that such a young woman could be so wise."

The very young attendant of whom he spoke was named Jiju and had at that time recently come from an eastern province. Her father was a distant relative of the empress and had sent her to acquire the social polish that only service in a noble house could give. He also probably expected that her position in such a house would allow her to make an advantageous marriage. Aoi remembered, too, that after the wise remark Jiju had ventured to recite

an old poem about going to bed with grief and waking to grief, which had brought a scornful opinion from the prince about hackneyed, secondhand emotions, after which the girl had fled weeping.

It had not been long before the whole household knew that the prince was making amends. Jiju was considered shy and ridiculously provincial and awkward. She was not lively and challenging in company and did not spread her skirts under her blind to attract the notice of the men who visited the empress. So when voices were heard in her room at night, there was a minor stir among the servants, who began to take careful notice and who soon told what they knew to all the ladies-in-waiting: that it was the prince who sent his man with letters, who sat talking into the night, and who was soon known to stay until dawn.

"You have not seen Jiju lately?" Aoi asked the prince.

"No, no. No." He had answered quickly. Though her mission here concerned Jiju, Aoi decided not to bring it up just yet. "Surely you cannot be asking me such a question. I had thought it obvious that I am one of those faithful ones, a man who will never forget his dead wife."

Before she went to bed, Aoi had reports from both O-hana, who had made herself very familiar with the prince's house, and the guard who had been sent across the river to search the temple. There was no unaccounted-for person in either place.

Early next morning, the light still dim, one of Aoi's guards stepped from the verandah and found the path that led downstream along the riverbank. He walked until he came to the weir, where five men were building a fire and untangling their nets. Seeing his city clothes, they bowed and moved him nearest to the flames. He surprised them by stepping in among them. They jerked away to a respectful distance and then were surprised again when he spoke to them in the local dialect. The oldest of the men asked how he came to speak so naturally.

"My father often brought me here when I was a boy, and since I had only sisters, I used to run away and fish with the boatman's sons. I am no stranger to this river."

"River has hard laws," said one of the men. The guard took this cue and led them into discussion of fatalities on the river, settling himself on a log. Soon it began to rain, and they raised a straw mat on poles.

Aoi found the rain a perfect excuse for staying longer in the prince's house, and she accepted the offer she had been sure would

come. Time was needed for the guard to make his report, and she felt that only after night had fallen could she finish what she had come to do.

During the morning, she and O-hana aired all the packed clothing and busied themselves in the drafty room until the prince sent to ask if she would join him. Already he had wine beside him.

"I have not told you," he said, "of all my work and study at the temple over there." He indicated the small temple across the river. "When I was a young man, I was attracted to religious life, and in fact my father encouraged me. But I was never serious about my studies, I would remain in the temple for a while and then follow some distracting affair at court or leave for weeks at a time to practice for an archery contest or help train the Gosechi dancers. Then I was married and soon found myself with a family. A younger prince does not have an easy time, you know, and after a certain failure I moved here and hoped to leave behind the complications and temptations of the world."

Outside rain dripped from the eaves. The fire in the brazier hissed, the bottle clicked against the cup.

"Somehow I have managed to settle my children in good marriages, all my sons advance at court, and I had looked forward to a few quiet years with my wife. Then she died so suddenly and I was left . . .

"The inner pillar
Supports the glorious roofs
Of the pagoda,
A tree shorn of its foliage,
Struck stark and strong by duty.

"It is not that I have been important at all. But a man feels his own situation intensely, and I am, to myself, like a pillar from which the rafters and beams have fallen away. What use can anyone make of me?

"It is true that, when I went to visit in the city, I thought that a miracle might be possible, that the cracked, dry, useless pillar might miraculously revive, put out roots and branches, leaf into life again. Being in that house was very stimulating, so many visitors, talk of this minister and that captain, conversation on every hand. But it took only a small element of trouble to make me realize that the world of the capital is not the place for me. I am back here now with my prayers and my studies. To give me some interest, the priests have suggested that we build an addition

to the temple. They have even said that when the new image hall is completed, I shall be in charge, with priests under me and my own quarters on the grounds. As you can see," he indicated the simple room, waved toward the kitchen, where there seemed to be a very small staff, "all my personal and material energies now go to the temple and my future there."

He had talked for a long time, through a further bottle of wine, delivered by the old servant sliding on his knees across the floorboards. There had been little response from Aoi, but his attitude had been one of persuasion and he now looked hopeful. She remained still, and in the silence they could hear the river sieving through the pebbles on the shore. Finally she spoke, her face carefully blank. "And what of the central pillar, the miraculously revived tree?"

A spasm crossed his features, whether of regret, of disgust for the grand image he had given himself in the poem, or of rejection she could not tell. "It has shivered into splinters and lies all about, turning to dust," he said.

At the weir, the guard showed the fishermen a fine knife and offered to give it to them. They could trade it and make up for fishing lost that morning. The talk was of bodies washed down recently against the dam of brush. Yes, they said, there had been a young woman.

"Who was she?" the guard asked.

An unknown, a plain girl, not at all a beauty, they said, pregnant, hair all chopped off, dressed in rough country clothes, battered from the rapids. They had sacrificed a lot of firewood to burn the body of a stranger.

"How was her hair chopped off?"

Not cut neatly, as any serving woman's hair would be, but uneven, all down her shoulders, but not as a nun's would be, either.

"Didn't your wives save any of the clothes?" The guard could not believe that country people would destroy anything that could be used or sold.

Maybe Taro's wife had saved the under-robe, which, strangely, had been of silk.

When the guard left the fishermen, he carried a carefully laundered and folded white silk woman's under-robe. He found Aoi waiting for him and made his report. She told him to hire one of the fishermen to take them across to the temple, late, after it was dark. She said that he and the other guard were to protect the boat

and not allow it to be taken by any person. He asked if she would need protection herself, and she said no.

The rain continued, and so it was earlier than she had expected when darkness came and she sent word to the prince that she had a reason to speak seriously with him. The vast guest room was not very clean or comfortable, but it was Aoi's place as long as she stayed in the house and she asked O-hana to bring him to her there.

He entered uncertainly, looking about as if he had never seen this room, crossing the floor with wandering steps, not sure whether he should sit, since Aoi, kneeling on a square cushion, had his usual place beside the brazier. She touched a second cushion that had been set to her left and moved it toward him. O-hana slid the door shut and went to wait in the kitchen. A small oil lamp burned within its paper shade. The coals in the brazier sizzled. Rain fell onto the verandah outside. The prince sat, coughed behind his hand, and could not find a word of greeting. His face seemed stretched across the bones, and his tongue was locked against his teeth.

"I have come here for a particular reason," Aoi began. "Rather, I should say I was sent. Because the Honorable Retired Empress is extremely worried and upset. The girl Jiju, for whom she is responsible, has disappeared."

After a pause, after he had struggled to operate his strained muscles, he said, "Oh?" in a croaking voice.

Though she tried, Aoi found that she could not soften her attitude. When she spoke again, her voice was as dry and cold as before. "That you visited Jiju—in her room—at night—and quite often is known in the empress's household."

Suddenly he thawed, his face flowed into amused smiles, he shook his head, his shoulders rose, his elbows left his sides, and, "No, no," he said, laughing, "I see what the impression was, but how can people be so mistaken?"

Aoi was silent, and he swept on, easy now in his denials. "She was a person to talk to, you see, sensitive and shy, and she understood my heart."

"She has been sad lately, the empress says, and so troubled that she was no use as a companion or even to help receive guests."

"And people connect me with this young woman's sadness?" He was serious now. "It has always been this way, you know. Even

for such an humble member of the royal family as I, people always exaggerate the least friendship."

"The girl has disappeared. The empress . . ." Aoi paused. What she was about to say was a direct request for an accounting from a source he could not ignore. ". . . thinks that you brought her here, for romantic reasons."

"Ah-h-h." He pressed his palms nervously together and forced a small laugh, shaking his head in wonder. "My sister-in-law has always had a lively imagination."

"I have not put your people in the position of protecting or betraying you, but I can say that there is proof that the girl was here," Aoi said.

He half turned his head away, watching her, his eyes almost closed. "I see," he said, speaking as if to himself, "that I must tell you the truth. Yes, I was fond of that girl. But she expected too much and she was, in the end, a rather boring companion. So I left the city and came back here. I have not seen her since, and she has certainly not been in my house." He found again his complacent smile. "I am not the type to engage in romantic trysts."

"Her body has been found at the weir."

"That is impossible." He had adopted smug composure, and his smile was firmly set.

Until now Aoi had held herself in balance. The empress had given her one clear instruction: she was to warn him or not, depending on whether he told the truth. She felt now the heaviness of judgment that this mission forced on her, and she rebelled. She would not be responsible for this man's fate, would not involve herself in his life to the extent of ending or prolonging it. She would expose his lies and his crime and let happen whatever was to come next.

"She has been found in the river, and she did not fall in and drown, nothing so simple as that," she said. "You thought we would not know the body found at the weir because she had been dressed in rough-woven clothes and because her hair had been cut—not expertly but just to rid the body of the very long hair that would mark her as a lady. A body with such cut hair must have been prepared before it was put in the river."

Here Aoi stopped, to see what he would say. It was his last chance.

"But there are many women here with cut hair—maids, nuns. This one is not the girl Jiju." The smiles of dismissal, the earnest urging came easily to him now.

"She was pregnant."

"Lady," he had reached the ultimate calm of complete denial, "this girl in the river, whoever she may have been, has nothing to do with me."

Aoi reached behind her for the folded under-robe the guard had brought. She held it on her knees, stroking the fine cloth. Small sounds of rain, of burning seemed to make intense silence, a silence of the future when all things concerning this prince would lie buried in shame.

"This girl Jiju," Aoi said with a small sigh, "was the pet of her family. Even her father doted on her, even such a stern fighting man—you know how they are, there in the eastern provinces, always at war."

The mocking smile on the prince's face did not change. His eyes glittered in the dim light, fixed on Aoi's eyes.

She looked at the coals in the brazier, filmed with ash but darkly glowing. Her hand would not move to stir them to give more light. She was cold, she could not help returning her gaze to his face with its false forgotten smile. Her lips barely parted as she spoke the final sentences.

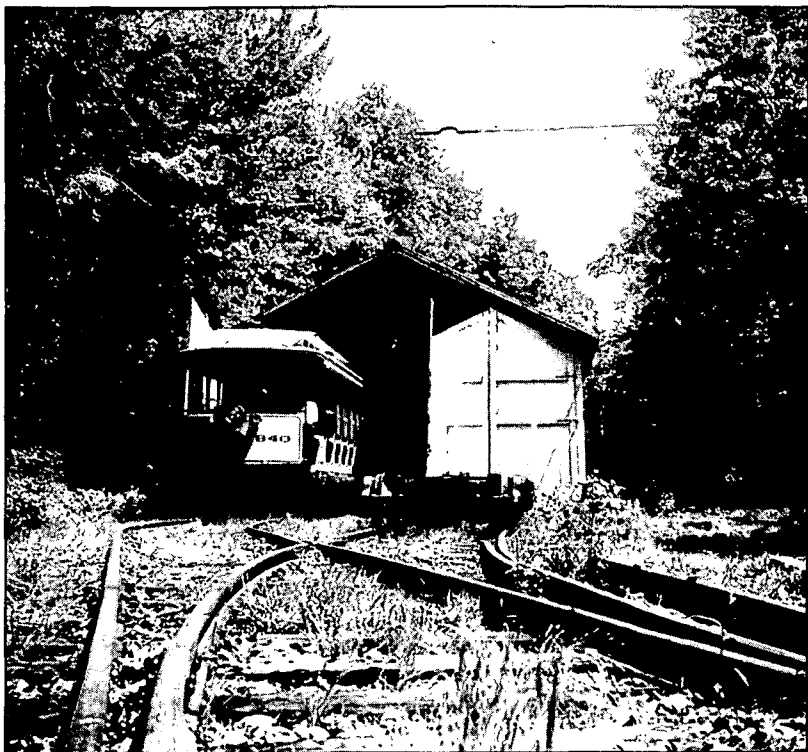
"They so doted on her that her name was embroidered in all her clothes. You killed her, I don't know how, cut her hair, changed her outer robes. But, being a man, you did not see what fine underclothes she wore."

He was stupid with dismay, his face slack, a thing she could not bear to see. Turning away, she forced her arm, which seemed to creak as it lifted, to take the fire tongs, plunge them into the red heart of the coals, and turn up the burning sides of the cut logs. As if lit and set free by the fire and the warmth, one more sentence escaped her.

"He is on his way here, her father."

For a few more seconds there was silence. Then the prince sprang up, panicked, clutching his clothes, spinning on his heels, dashing to throw the door panel along its track and run down the hall. Aoi did not turn. She was regarding the throb of fire deep in the sections of log, red hot but not consuming.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH

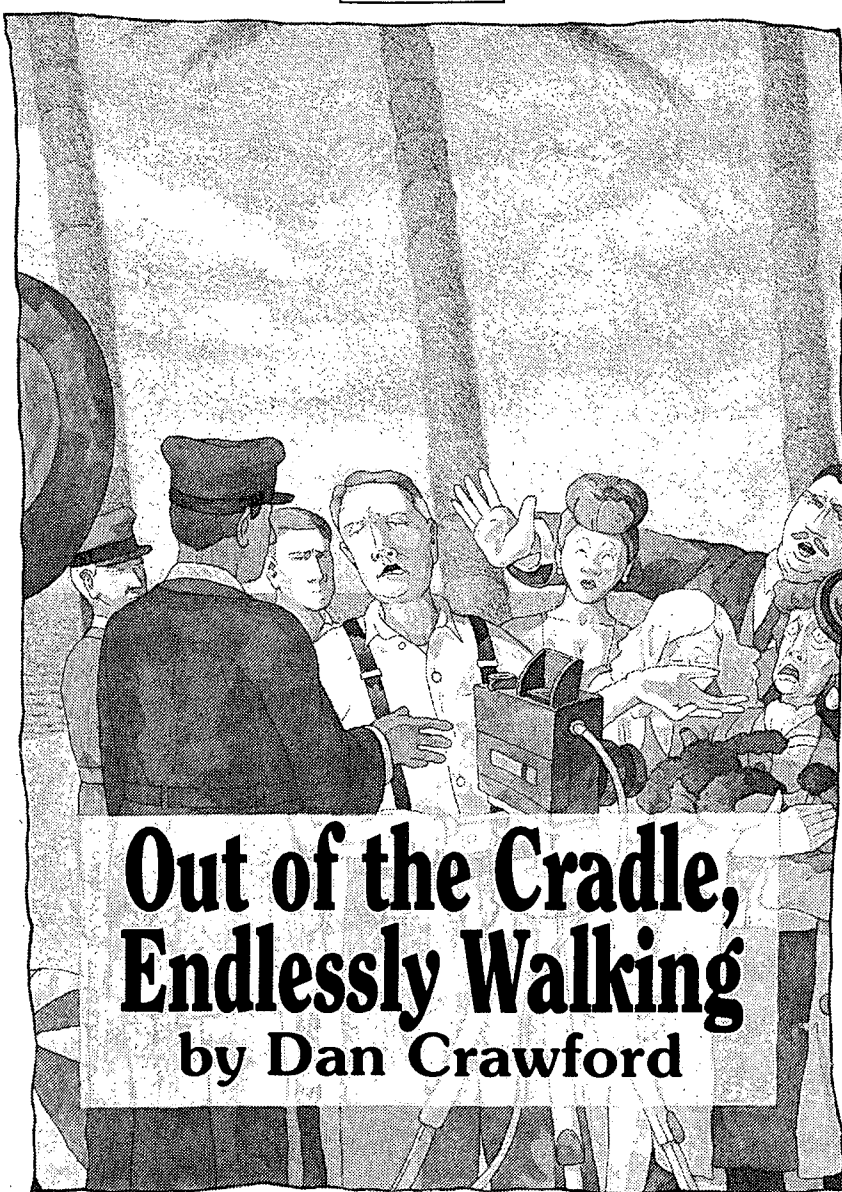


William D. Middleton, from THE TIME OF THE TROLLEY.

Wilderness trolley. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1540 Broadway, New York, New York 10036. Please label your entry "February Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit.

The winning entry for the October Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 155.

FICTION



Out of the Cradle, Endlessly Walking

by Dan Crawford

Illustration by Jim Adams

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It was a typical day at the beach, right out of the travel posters: the clear, clean sky, the beach ball, the tall palms casting shadows across shimmering silver sands. A couple of gulls sailed just within eyeshot. We leaned back, our arms straight down from our shoulders to shove our wrists into the sand behind our backs, and turned our heads inland to take the light and warmth full on our fresh, dewy faces.

Only one thing was wrong. "Shouldn't my shadow be going the same direction as the ones from the palm trees?" I asked.

King didn't even have enough interest in the question to sneer. "Don't tell me my business," he said. A click of a switch and another set of lights came on, throwing new shadows in the same direction as the ones painted on the backdrop.

"Sorry," I said. He grunted.

I understand there are studios with photographers who pamper their models. Maybe Peter King himself would have smiled and nodded if the shadows had been pointed out to him by the likes of Carole Lombard or Ann Sothern. But I am neither of those people, as Cal points out to me every time he gets me a part as pie target in a Three Stooges short. In the acting world, I am a semi-pro.

This means I get paid half the time.

"Why don't you have some bunnies over here?" asked Sissy. She shook her hair back. "Don't they have bunnies at the beach?"

Constant reference to bunnies is one of the hazards of working with Sissy. King just said, "Arm behind your head!" We followed orders, and smiled as he pressed the button on his cable release. "Bunnies!" he growled. "Church bells!"

His budget had been pruned lately, and he was taking it out on us. In fact, we were part of the problem. Mammoth Titan Vital Studios was going to take the plunge with a huge-budget musical far beyond its usual grinders, to be released with great fanfare and greater profit in 1942. Tentatively titled *The Little Brown Church*, it was a small-town romance involving a young single minister (Bing Crosby had been suggested) and the daughter of the choir director (rumor said Ginger Rogers). Some of us in the choir were to do a great deal with songs and humorous subplots. Wilson G. Cape, who had been signed to direct, had vetoed the studio's offer to hire some real talent, saying some of us (me me!) showed promise.

"We'll give them some new faces," he said, "and make *Lit-*

the Brown Church something to remember."

King had his own opinions. "That story was so bad they had to edit it before it was good enough for the wastebasket," he growled. Wilson G. Cape was his neighbor, and the two men were nodding acquaintances, but this did not excuse insubordination on the part of his studio and his camera fodder. (Motion pictures, you understand, exist solely to advertise Peter King's artistic stills.) I wasn't weeping for him, though: artists were meant to suffer.

He checked the lights for the next picture. "Collars up!" he snapped.

Like performing dogs, we can go into all sorts of intricate tricks at only one or two words of command. This order, based on the cleavage allowance King has from the studio, was to remind us to doublecheck everything when we moved so that absolutely nothing beyond permissible limits showed outside the swimsuits. And, also like dogs, we could do this trick without really thinking a lot about it because we'd done it so often.

We get our pictures taken a lot; you'll see us in plenty of magazines, especially from the shoulders down. Better-funded actresses who are deficient in

other ways get their heads pasted on over ours. I, just to take a handy example, have been in every movie rag published in North America, and on the covers of most of the ones that go in for photo covers. But my face usually turns up only toward the back, sometimes only in the ads headlined "Curious Pictures, 25¢."

Now, provided my name isn't thrown around, and I get paid, it doesn't matter to me what they do to my pictures. (That is, it doesn't matter legally; Cal showed me that bit in the model release. It may matter to me personally, but that doesn't matter.) So I never know if I'm going to be in *Photoplay* wearing the head of someone who earns in a day what I do in a year or in a brown envelope sold by a geek in an alley, wearing four feathers and a smile. Most of the photographers I run into are selling pictures the studios don't know are being taken with studio film and studio cameras. I can always tell which shots the studio isn't going to see. The closer to the toe of the shoe the heel is, the less likely the pix are going to any magazine that sells on the open rack. The higher the skirt, the lower the status of the periodical.

A lot depends on the photographer, too. Jim, who is King's

assistant, can say, "Show me your stocking tops" while Peter King can say, "Take off your pants and stand on your head. And keep your feet still while I balance this sword on them or I'll get another girl." And Jim's pictures are dirty, but King's are art. Jim's get printed a thousand times, for sale to boys who hide them under the mattress. King's get printed in special editions of matted sixteen-by-twenty prints, for sale to boys who hide them in print cases in the den. I was at a party once where the flower arrangements cost as much as I made in the fiscal years 1939 and 1940 combined. The host opened a case and took out a big picture of me serving as a trellis for some roses: real roses, as I recall, with real thorns. He spoke with fire and passion about the style, the beauty of the picture, never knowing that the original stood eight feet away, someone he'd sniffed at when her date brought her in.

Jim would get fired if the studio could prove what he was doing. King would probably just get docked. The studio doesn't like to waste its material on dirty pictures or art. So the great majority of pictures taken are for their use. Today we were here for the September swimsuit pix. In fall, we have

to reinforce the belief of people in North Dakota that it never gets cold in California.

"Figure Four," said King, pointing to Sissy. "You, up and arch."

Sissy tucked one ankle under the other leg. I stood up to take hold of a wooden post, arching my back and letting my smiling face turn up as if it was a matter of particular ecstasy for me to be hanging onto this exact hunk of wood at this exact time.

A door slammed in the darkness beyond King as he pressed the cable release. "Hey!" someone shouted.

Out of the shadows came everybody's idea of a cub reporter with his first scoop. This young man of action was King's assistant Jim, and he was so excited about something that even his boss's glare didn't slow him down.

"Hey!" he shouted again, screeching to a halt just short of disaster with the lights. "You know Wilson Cape? He's dead!"

This took a moment to seep in. "So's vaudeville," I told him. "Quit clowning."

"No, honest!" He had to pause to swallow and then went on. "They're talking it over down at the gate. He woke up dead this morning."

That took several moments. Peter King was the first to recover. "Now that you have passed along the gate gossip," he said, "may we get back to work?"

Jim looked at his superior and shrank eight inches. "Um," he said. "Er. Yes. Um. Er, you want me to move this light a little?"

Peter King was looking at us and framing his next shot. "Don't tell me where I want my lights," he said without a glance at Jim.

"Yes, sir," Jim said, evaporating a few feet to one side. "No, sir."

King opened his mouth to send us into another pose, but the door slammed again. His eyes rolled up.

This time a small, dark woman with earrings down to here and a poodle in her arms appeared out of the shadows. She paused at the edge of the light to get her bearings and adjust her poodle. Then she threw herself at Peter King, crying, "Oh, my love!"

Peter King was able to sustain the impact as she thudded into him, but the poodle barked a complaint. The woman attached to the poodle was Mrs. King. I'd never known her to visit the studio, or seen her in the flesh. But she accompanied

him to all the hot spots, and I'd seen the pictures.

"What do you want, Moira?" he demanded, his tone not all that different from the one he'd used to Jim, for all he was stroking her hair.

"Oh, it's the police!" she exclaimed into his shoulder. "They came, and they were suggesting such terrible things! I had to come warn you!"

"We'd've told him, ma'am."

They hadn't slammed the door. In the pictures, the cops always slam doors.

It seemed Jim had reported the story accurately. Wilson Cape had died that morning after struggling against some kind of poison all night. The police were wondering if Peter King could shed some light on a little party he had attended at Cape's house the night before.

"We'd just like you to come and answer some questions, sir," said the younger cop, a blond with the looks to have been in our business and the brains to keep out.

King was not impressed by looks, and no brains that were outside his own skull counted. "If I'm under arrest," he said, folding his arms, "I'd like to see a piece of paper that says so. If

not, it can surely wait until I'm finished here."

"You can't take him!" cried Mrs. King, throwing herself and her poodle, who gloried in the name Minnehaha, between them. "He didn't do it! He didn't mean it!"

The other cop, a tall man with darker, if scantier, hair, opened his mouth to answer, but Sissy had pushed up to join the debate. "Poodles should run free!" she cried. "They're practically bunnies!"

The poodle, whose patience was being tried even more than that of the city's finest, bit at the finger Sissy was using to point. But Sissy had withdrawn the finger in time and was turning on the police with her next line. She had just finished a comedy short about a woman accused of stealing a dog. Sissy has always been better at remembering her lines than forgetting them afterward.

I mouthed the line along with her. "Why not let the puppy show you who she likes best?" The hand swung past the poodle again. Minnehaha's teeth came together just short of the little finger.

"All . . . all . . . all . . ." the older cop began. His younger partner rolled big blue eyes at him. They were being very polite to us, but I could see it was an effort. The city keeps some

cops polished up nice for use with film people. Mammoth Titan was not really big enough to deserve this kind of consideration. Maybe Peter King was.

"All we're asking . . ." The dark-haired cop's eyes snapped wide as Sissy turned toward Mrs. King again and Minnehaha's head jerked toward what was pointed at her this time. No damage was done to Sissy's career; she had swung back to Peter King to implore him to back her up on the question of legal ownership of that poodle.

"Stop that, Minnehaha!" ordered Mrs. King. "Remember Fifi? She was naughty about biting, too."

Jim's allergy to poodles seemed to be acting up; he was gone. I wished I were. *Little Brown Church* would probably still be made. There would be delays, though, while the studio hunted for another big director who didn't mind having it known he was working with a teeny outfit like Mammoth Titan. And a new director, once found, made it a new project. This meant rewrites. It meant recasting. It meant no solo song, and maybe no part, for a nobody.

"Don't take her away!" Sissy was going on, her hands clasped at the V of her suit. "Who would feed the puppy?"

Unless you arrest poodles, too. Wouldn't you need a smaller cell, though?"

Mrs. King imitated the gesture, but it just wasn't the same. She had a poodle, and she had no such V. "A director has so many enemies in this town! Anybody could have put something in his *hors d'oeuvres*!"

The older man wiped his forehead. "Ma'am all we want..."

The door slammed back in the shadows again. I should have known Jim didn't have it in him to run away like an intelligent human being. No, Jim worked for a studio, so he had just gone for Laszlo.

"Well, gentlemen," said Laszlo, striding for the light with arms swinging, "what's this all about?"

Laszlo is better at looking like somebody than actually being somebody, but on first meeting he can be impressive. The younger cop turned to him to explain. "We just wanted to ask Mr. Peter King a few questions, sir. Mr. Wilson Cape died this morning in what is presumed a homicide, and because Mr. King was with the deceased until late the previous evening, we need to get his information."

There was to have been a dream sequence, which got flashier and longer every time

Cape talked about it. Sissy and I, according to his last description, would have had an extended eccentric dance, amounting to maybe five solid minutes of screen time all to ourselves.

"And how would you put handcuffs on a puppy?" Sissy was asking Jim. She set a finger in the middle of her chin. "Or would they be footcuffs?"

"Poor Gloria!" cried Mrs. King. "To lose her husband and her dear doggie at the same time!"

She jerked back as her own dear doggie tried to take breakfast out of Sissy's near shoulder. No one else spotted this because Laszlo was trying the gladmouth on the cops.

"Have you ever considered modeling?" he asked. "It would make a fantastic picture, as if you were on the beach to warn the girls about wearing such scanty bathing attire."

The older man glanced at Sissy as though longing to take her into protective custody but said, "Oh, we see that and worse all the time. Haven't made an arrest for that in years."

"It would certainly show the little old lady in Dubuque that our police are still on the job, protecting the minds of California's children," Laszlo replied. He turned to his star photogra-

pher. "Wouldn't it be a colossal picture, Petey?"

Peter King had not moved two feet from his camera. His eyes narrowed at the word Petey, but all he said was, "Hokey."

This was not what Laszlo wanted to hear. "Oh, Petey, come on. It would be a stupendous picture. Really sell in the sticks."

Peter King turned his face away. "Don't tell me my business."

Minnehaha, meanwhile, had started to growl. "Ooh!" cried Sissy. "Listen to her purr!"

"Poodles don't purr," Jim noted.

Sissy clapped her hands. "That's right! Oh, she's a talented puppy! She knows how to purr! I just know she'll be famous in movies if they don't arrest her and her mommy! You won't, will you? You might ruin her career! Surely you don't want to nip a great actress in the bud!"

This declaration naturally transfixed everyone except Minnehaha herself, who lunged and just missed nipping Sissy on the ear. Laszlo took the opportunity offered by this distraction to sidle over to me. "Listen," he told me out of one side of his mouth, "tell them King was never at that party. He was here, taking pictures of

you. Got it? Make it sound good."

I had sort of curled up with my arms around my legs and my chin on my knees. I let go and stood up. "Can do," I said, shaking a little of the gloom off. I figured I'd have to smile for this.

He jerked his head toward the younger cop, who was looking huffy. Sissy was distracting the guy's partner. But it wasn't her fault. This is what we do for a living.

"Think you can sell it to him?" Laszlo muttered.

"I'll get him when I go into my dance," I said, and hitched up the shoulder of my suit.

"She never could have stolen the poor puppy!" Sissy was explaining to the older cop, who had abandoned all attempts to explain things to her. "It's her very own, and anyway, she was busy very late last night, at Mrs. Cape's party! Mrs. Cape doesn't have a doggie any more, poor thing! Isn't that right, Mr. King? He'll tell you! He was right there with her!"

She waved a hand past the snap of Minnehaha's latest near miss and indicated the photographer. "You were at the party, weren't you?" she said.

"I was," said the cameraman. Laszlo gave me a shove backward.

"Forget it," he said as I sat down hard on a very rustic imitation rowboat.

I forgot it and even forgave it without a second thought. Laszlo is, after all, somebody's nephew, and it pays to hold no grudges against that mighty nation. Anyway I figured King could take care of himself. He was a wizard at making anything look like anything else with his camera. He could make me look like I was an actress. He could make an actress look like me. He had recently taken a kid who seemed to be chewing gum even in her sleep and made her look like the most exciting thing to happen to Hollywood since talkies.

Maybe he could make himself look innocent.

Laszlo had plunged back into the fray and was talking tough this time. "It's not going to do you a bit of good with the authorities when they find out you've been hounding this woman in her home."

"It's not a hound," Sissy informed him. "It's a pooooooodle!" Minnehaha had time for two near misses in the first syllable of "poodle."

"Now, we've got nothing to do with any other inquiries," said the younger cop. "We . . ."

"Mr. King is an artist," Laszlo went on, shaking a finger at the police. "He has to be

in the right frame of mind to do his work properly, and a disturbance such as this can cost us several days of his services while he calms down again. Naturally, with what we're paying him, this comes to a considerable loss to the studio. There must be some way we can take care of this at a lesser expense."

His eyes rolled up as though he couldn't believe what he'd just said. Four other eyes narrowed. They might have gone for it if he'd been a little more subtle about it. Then again, there are things that can't be bought, no matter how blank the check.

"But I just know he never could have done it," cried Mrs. King. "He left early."

"What?" Sissy demanded. "You don't think Mr. King stole the poodle, do you? I don't remember that in the script. Anyway, he wouldn't do it. He's already got one just like this dear little poodle bunny." She put her face down at the slaving beast, but Minnehaha's timing was off. The poodle kept pausing to growl first; by the time it got around to the bite, Sissy had moved on.

Jim came over to me to watch the show. "What do you think?" he whispered. "Think he did it?"

All I could think of was Wilson Cape and my shot at the big time lying in the same casket. I'd been doing exactly the same kinds of jobs around this town for fifteen years—competently. That was all. No one ever screamed with pleasure at the sight of me, and nobody ever told me, seriously, to pack my bags and get out. If prices went down, I might do very well. If prices went up, I might starve. If prices went nowhere, I might go on just the same for another ten, fifteen years with a slight adjustment in makeup. After that, it wouldn't get so very different. I'd just play the mothers of the women I was playing now. I could put in another thirty years or so of that.

That's a long time to be competent.

Laszlo, for whom competence is the least of his problems, was summing up for the defense. "All right, you don't have any arrest warrant. So why don't you go back and tell your captain that we'll have Mr. King and Mr. King's attorney in to see him tomorrow morning?"

The younger man's nostrils flared a little. "Very well, sir. But it would have looked much better for Mr. King to have come forward with his information when first asked."

Laszlo shook both hands at him and snapped, "I'm the pub-

licity professional in this room! Don't you tell me how it would look! I'll tell you how things look!"

The police know all about the sensitivity of nephews in this town, so they moved off. Laszlo turned to us with a smirk of triumph, really too important to share his victory with us but finding it impossible to resist.

"There," he said, pointing his dangerous fingers at us. "That's how to handle . . . eeyack!"

Minnehaha had given up on Sissy and decided to settle for what was at hand. It was probably the only time Peter King ever smiled at a poodle.

Once Peter King was finished with us (the interlude with the police did not disturb his frame of mind at all; the man has not a nerve in his entire body), we were up for a session of lesser pictures, just head and shoulder shots, with Jim. At one we took a break and went down to the canteen, a ptomaine factory that had recently been renovated to look even more rundown.

I was the last one to reach the table. When I got there, Jim was already lecturing. "You just watch," he informed us. "America always enters its wars in April: the Revolution, the Civil War, World War I

... I guarantee, April, 1942, we'll get into it."

"I hope not," Olivia told him. "The planes are lots bigger than in the last war. We might end up like London."

"If California's bombed, I want to be killed in bed," Velvet declared.

"The odds are in your favor," Olivia told her.

Velvet tossed her head. "Even if we're not bombed, it'll be bad for business. Who's going to want to go to movies during a war?"

"The May Act is cutting into your business already," noted Olivia, patting her hand. Velvet flashed her teeth. They had spinach between them.

Velvet and Olivia, neither of whom had been seriously inconvenienced by the May Act (which applied only to full-time prostitutes operating near military bases), made up the Mammoth Titan modeling foursome with Sissy and me. The studio liked to have an assortment of bulky-sweatered women, one with each of the four basic hair colors: blonde, brunette, red-head, and platinum. This made the job easier for the lesser photo hacks—Jim, say—if the actress whose head was to be placed over an impressive bust was wearing her hair low this season.

Mammoth Titan had made us bosom buddies, but that didn't necessarily make us friends. Velvet was spitting out some remark about where the Nazis could pin Olivia's Iron Cross, and Olivia was getting her hands under her plate to throw it, when Jim exploded, "That's it! Spies!"

We let Jim hang around in our high-class group because he is prone to entertaining declarations like this. "Spies?" Olivia inquired, her leftover mashed potatoes still at the ready. "You mean Mata Very Hairy over there?"

"No," I put in, "it's somebody sabotaging this food to sap our strength."

"No no no!" said Jim. "Wilson Cape! He was probably onto some nest of enemy spies. If we find it ourselves, we can solve the murder."

"That's easy," said Sissy, glancing up from her plate. "Just look for the little spy eggs."

Some of us paused to consider this, which would have been a pretty good crack if she hadn't meant it, but Jim didn't get where he is today by paying attention to anything a woman says. He flattened his napkin on the table and took out a pencil. "We need a list of suspects. Who looks like a spy? And who could have gotten close enough

to Wilson Cape to slip him the poison?"

"Well, don't look at me," ordered Velvet.

"We never do, dear," Olivia assured her. "Unless the director absolutely insists."

Velvet sniffed and threw her hair back again. "Well, I was married to him, you know."

We did know, but that was hardly enough evidence to make her a serious suspect. Around here, we used Velvet's marriages to time eggs.

"Laszlo," Jim announced, writing it down. "With a name like that, he's probably a foreigner."

"You're not going to write down everybody in town with a foreign name, are you?" Olivia demanded.

"Before or after they changed it?" I inquired.

"Not the poodles," specified Sissy. "Just because they're French doesn't mean they're in a spy nest. Anyway, they don't lay eggs."

"It was probably something more personal than spies," I said. "Probably somebody who hated Cape and Peter King. Otherwise why do it when King would be the obvious suspect?"

"Oh, that's just because he's handy," said Jim, drawing a cube on the napkin.

"You won't narrow it down any by looking for people who

hated King," Velvet told me. "Let's just stick to people with foreign names."

"Goldfarb is a foreign name, too, you know," said Olivia. "Or did you have another one before that?"

"Any number of actress-models could've hated them both," Jim reminded me. "You know those pictures."

I did know those pictures, but he didn't have to say it so loud. And anyway, he had it all wrong. Jim they might kill for the pictures he sold on the sly. King's could only enhance a career. I know at least two cowboy stars who owe their livelihood to a couple of shots King took of them, one wearing six feathers and the other in a laurel wreath.

"Now, who else is there?" Jim went on. "We've got Laszlo . . ."

"Hi there!"

We did have Laszlo, and incredibly, Laszlo had a tray of canteen food. "Mind if I sit in? Thought I'd have a bite with the troops today. Start to feel cut off from the real nitty-gritty up there in the offices."

Olivia and I slid apart to give him room. We gave him lots of room. When Laszlo was being friendly, it meant either that he was under heavy pressure from his uncle, who ran the place, or that he was going to

fire half the studio. Either way, he was dangerous. And he had never gone to the length of eating in the canteen before.

He found out why he'd never been there. "Er, what is this?" he asked, poking at the gravy with his fork.

"What did you order?" asked Olivia.

"I forgot."

"Then what difference does it make?"

He risked a sip of the coffee instead, made a face, and then smeared a smile across his mouth. "Kids, it's nice to sit and rest for a while. I've been flying all morning, making calls and writing memos about this Wilson Cape business. It really screws up the *Little Brown Church* schedules."

"But the picture's still on track, isn't it?" I asked.

"Oh yes, oh yes." He waved a hand toward the ceiling, "C. C. has his heart set on it. Only thing is, we can't go ahead on it till we see how this shakes down. Kind of hard to promote a good old fashioned family picture with half your studio poisoning the other half."

"Think he did it?" asked Jim, setting an elbow over Laszlo's name on the napkin.

"It's not important what I think," Laszlo said, with rare truth. "What's important is what the people out there

think. Makes bad headlines, really bad headlines, if the tabloids can say, 'Killer Arrested; Throws Wild Party to Celebrate Poisoning.'"

"The Kings are having a party?" Olivia demanded.

Laszlo nodded. "I guess it's some kind of tradition. One of them—Cape or King—would have a party, and the other would have one the next night and invite the first one to it, so they'd be even and not have to remember who owed who an invite. King won't cancel, so the party's on for tonight. You're going."

Velvet thought this was a question. "I'm not. I don't have an invitation."

Laszlo stuck a thumb just about where the heartburn would get him if he actually ate canteen food. "I'm your invitation. We're substituting you for five of the servants they hired for tonight."

This was as hard to digest as lunch. While we were staring, Laszlo shoved his plate to one side and leaned in. "I've got to find another suspect to feed to the police tomorrow morning," he whispered, "and you're going to find me one. We need King."

"You needed Cape," I pointed out.

"Well, we can't have him now, and we can't afford to lose

them both, on top of the bad publicity. You go to that party tonight and see if you can find somebody who really hates King that we can pin the murder and the frame on."

"You don't have to go to a lot of trouble to find somebody who hates Peter King," Olivia said.

"But we need somebody who's really obvious," said Laszlo. "Somebody who really makes an ass out of himself at the party tonight, say, insults the host, calls him a murderer, something like that. Anybody will do, as long as it's somebody from outside Mammoth Titan."

The same glance passed around the table, from face to face. We needed just a little more information. I finally volunteered to ask for it.

"Suppose we've got other plans for tonight?" I said. "Like maybe anything but taking part in a frame-up?"

Laszlo smiled upon me. "That makes life easier; I won't have any trouble thinking of four or five likely suspects tomorrow morning when I'm at police headquarters. On the other hand, it would be a mighty big boost for publicity for *Little Brown Church* if the papers found out the *female lead* had been involved in the investigation of Cape's murder."

That was what he'd ne-

glected to tell us: the ante. In case we'd missed the point, he continued, "Play along, and one of you can be modeling your sweater bumps on the cover of *Photoplay* this time next year."

"I do that now," I said, "only with someone else's head."

"Well, I'll go if she won't," said Velvet.

"I'm in," I said.

"Me, too," said Olivia.

There had never been any question about Jim; this was right up his alley. That left only Sissy, who had to be awakened from her concentration on a rather limp mystery fruit cobbler and told what was afoot.

"A party at Mr. King's house?" she demanded. "Where they have that darling poodle bunny? Oh, I haven't been out there since it was Mr. Gilbert's house. That was when I was sixteen."

Sissy is refreshingly candid about her age. Those of us who were born the same year aren't very refreshed.

Jim immediately took charge of the commando operation. "We'll meet here at, let's say, five sharp," he ordered. "Better synchronize your watches."

To gratify Laszlo, who expected to see us take this seriously, we obediently reset our timepieces. Laszlo frowned at Sissy.

"Why are you wearing two watches?" he demanded. "They don't even show the same time."

She turned dazzling eyes on him. "If they showed the same time," she told him; "I wouldn't need them both, would I?"

Laszlo found this as hard to take as the canteen food and moved on to where he could be safely out of touch with the real nitty-gritty.

They gave us nice little suits out of Costume, just the sort of thing Laszlo would think appropriate for servants. "This is a party," I said. "I don't expect there'll be a phone booth or a roulette wheel anywhere on the premises. Besides, Mrs. King sets out cigarettes for her guests and wouldn't like us selling them."

Laszlo wouldn't let us turn the trays in, though. "I think I know a little more about parties at this level of society than you girls," he said. "Maybe you'll be able to pick up some spare change."

"Not how she usually does," said Velvet. "The tray would just be in the way."

I'd done this kind of work before—the waitress bit, not the secret agent stuff—and even after we ditched the cigarette trays, I thought we looked

pretty cheap. That's why I'm on my side of the camera, I guess. Hardly anybody looked at us. Those who did didn't waste time studying our clothes but just patted us wherever it was convenient and made declarations of undying and passionate chumminess.

The set wasn't what I'd expected from a Peter King production, either: one of those houses with leopard skins dumped all over everything. But maybe that was Mrs. King's touch. He, at least, had had his way with the walls, which were hung with framed photographs that bore only dates, no titles.

Guests still celebrating repeal moved in and among the leopard skins and the publicity stills, wearing suits to hold in what spilled out in King's photos. The crowd was a little sparse, some of the guests declining to attend any party thrown by a possible murderer.

"Look at that! Mrs. Cape! Coming to this place when her husband's been poisoned!"

"Huh! When her poodle died, she wore black for a month and postponed her sister's wedding."

"The poodle was smarter."

In the spaces between bunches of guests wandered we spies and a number of former directors now working as wait-

ers. Velvet was paying attention to guests and waiters equally (you never know when a waiter's going to get the right phone call), sensuously seething in unconscious imitation of a much better paid actress who stood six feet away. That worthy's eyes narrowed as she looked at a picture that had been taken when her hair was another color and her nose a touch less straight. It was a gaze of sheer hatred, but she never once looked from it to Peter King. She didn't hate the photographer who had dressed her in three leaves and told her to hang from a tree. She hated the woman in the picture for being so eternally young and obviously, though frozen on a paper at a distant date, so energetic. She finally stalked over to me to get the stiffest drink I was passing around.

A few more guests arrived and were added to the blend of morbid gossip.

"I was at that party last night. I didn't think he looked good when I left."

"By the time you left last night, you couldn't see anything. Listen. You think our host..."

"Peter King? All he thinks about are his pictures."

"Oh, yes. Dreadfully cheap, isn't it? He covers his walls with them because he gets

them free. And look at the furnishings. One room at my place probably cost as much as everything in this whole house."

"Yeah, but you probably bought all your stuff on instalments."

"Sure. It's more expensive that way."

Olivia, seeing that Velvet had the sultry pouts tied up, was displaying her over-the-shoulder grins for anyone handy. This gave her a mischievous girl-next-door quality suited to a choir director's daughter. I didn't feel like auditioning tonight and was probably smiling slightly more than Frankenstein's monster, being in much the same mood. Laszlo's promises were A-Budget, but what he generally delivered was Poverty Row.

Olivia sidled over to a slight man with jet black hair and a grandiose mustache and offered him something from her display of hors d'oeuvres. He picked among the tiny food-stuffs and then cried, "Ah! My mothera, she'sa usada ta make dese verra same-a ting, only she'sa usada a littla more oliva oil!"

"I hear that's Francois di Lammermoor," Velvet panted into my ear.

I was able to maintain my flat expression because I'd

never heard of him before. "Who he?"

"This week's foreign genius, I guess," she said. "He might be coming over to Mammoth Titan."

"Figures," I said. "He'd be Laszlo's choice to direct a musical of small-town America."

She didn't hear this because she was already sauntering across the room, apparently on her way to the bar. A handkerchief fluttered to the floor just as she passed the immigrant genius. He stooped to fetch it, but Olivia was there first.

"Hey, ya dropped this," she said, jamming it down into what was left of the top of Velvet's costume. "Ya wanna stick it way down if ya want it ta stay."

Velvet thanked her with a salute the Hays Office would not have approved. Any sound effects she intended to go along with this were interrupted by a summons.

"Psssssst!"

I headed over to see what the bartender wanted, dragging Sissy away from a discussion of bunnies in wartorn Europe with Di Lammermoor's aide, a tall, quiet man with grey hair. Velvet and Olivia converged on the bar with us.

The bartender was dressed like the former ambassador of a now nonexistent republic. The

wide cummerbund was supposed to disguise a little spy camera. It didn't, but as long as you didn't see him in profile, you didn't notice it for the first twenty seconds or so.

"Still excited about this assignment?" he asked.

"I know you are, Jim," I sighed. "Isn't that enough for all of us?"

He seemed to take this as an affirmative and leaned forward to point. "See that guy?"

Di Lammermoor was going on about something in the face of a tall square-built man who could have bought and sold Mammoth Titan out of pocket change. The other man was listening, which convinced me Di Lammermoor must be somebody.

"Keep an eye on him," Jim went on. "He's a foreigner; maybe he's the spy boss."

"What makes you think so?" Olivia demanded. "I've been working on John Hosier all night."

"Ah, you do that at every party," sneered Velvet.

"Listen!" ordered Jim, lowering his voice to a breath and his chin nearly to the top of the bar. "Cape found out Laszlo was part of a spy and saboteur ring in the motion picture industry. Then Laszlo found out about Cape, and took care of him. The spy boss has to check

and make sure he didn't leave any clues behind."

"Okay," I said, leaning on the bar so as to have my fist handy to his nose. "So that's what happened. So why is Laszlo bothering to send us all over here if he and the spy boss are busy covering up?"

He straightened and spread out his hands. "To throw us off the trail, of course. We'd never suspect him of being behind the murder if he tells us to try to keep King from being picked up. Remember why he sent us? To find some patsy to take the blame. The only thing is that the patsy will be taking Laszlo's heat off, not King's."

"Kind of complicated," said Olivia.

"That's the way spies like it," Jim informed us. "The more complicated it is, the harder they are to track. Their whole career is deception and complicated patterns of betrayal. That's why so many of them went into the promotion end of the business."

Velvet put a limp hand to her forehead. "You don't mean to say Laszlo would lie to us."

Jim snorted. "Only when the palms are green." As Sissy checked her hands, he went on, "But we don't know what other doublecrosses he might have in mind. So watch for dirty tricks."

"In this dress, I have to," I said.

We agreed that we would look even less suspicious than we did now if we took the studying of Di Lammermoor in shifts. Then we got our trays filled with recent orders and escaped just as a sozzled soul sloshed over to ask if Jim knew how to make a Red Snapper.

I had the first watch. What I watched was Di Lammermoor shaking his hands at the ceiling and crying, "May ze Sacred Blue dezend on me, if I cannot make ze better moom picture zan ze Warners!"

In spite of myself, I decided he was worth watching. Without knowing it, perhaps, Jim had had a good idea. This foreign director might make a pretty good pigeon, especially if Laszlo could make it look like Di Lammermoor had lusted to direct *Little Brown Church*. I was not, after all, in this game for justice or for vengeance. I was here to take one last grab at a good part in a big budget picture.

But the first thing to do was find out who'd brought him and who his friends were. Big targets can be easy to hit, but sometimes they get nasty after you hit them.

So I sauntered over, aiming my tray and my hips at him, to try to lure a little information

into the open. "What are you drinking, monsieur?" I asked him.

"No, no, señorita," he replied. "Not yet, gracias."

He couldn't have aroused my suspicions better if he'd revealed a tie pin with a swastika and a Valentine signed, "Love, Adolf." A party guest who wouldn't fill up with free liquor? But then, a foreigner might not be familiar with our quaint American customs. I strolled away to see if his aide was thirstier.

He was, but his needs had been supplied by the hostess. "There you are, Monsieur Lafayette," she said, pressing a glass into his hand. In the arm she wasn't using for that, she still clutched a poodle. Otherwise, it was a much different woman from the hysterical creature who had rushed into our session. Now she was all pearls and a slightly lifted nose.

"Eet ees a great meesfortune," agreed the aide. "I cannot have ze least drop of ze alcohol. But come, you were telling me about ze tragedy of last night."

"Oh, it was perfectly dreadful," she told him, squeezing her poor companion until it snapped at Monsieur Lafayette's glass. "If only we had

stayed later, we might well have been able to help."

There was no reason in the world that he shouldn't be interested in the town's latest killing. But then I glanced up and saw Mrs. Cape, standing next to a very expensive statue of Joan of Arc checking her nail job before battle.

The two women were neighbors and friends but nothing alike. Mrs. Cape was a big blonde in red, and had always been a big blonde in red, once being the chief big blonde in red in the chorus line at the Chandinga. Mrs. King's parents had made their money before the little brunette was born, lots of it, so her only occupation before "his wife" had been "their daughter."

Mrs. Cape was chatting with the nondrinking director Di Lammermoor, and her broad gestures suggested she was also talking about the excitement of the previous night. I eased my way in that direction.

"The Kings were so good about staying late," she said, clasping her hands. "Moirra offered to help clean up, even. They were practically the last to leave." She reached up to dab away a tear. "They've always been such good friends of ours."

"I, er, understand dem to say dat dey left early," said Di

Lammermoor, running a hand over his chin.

"Oh, no; they always stayed late. They were always so good to me and to poor Wilson! You can't believe what those terrible police are suggesting!" She turned aside to dab at another runny eye. I pulled back, both so she wouldn't recognize me (we had worked together on *Flying Up to Ottawa*) and because if I stood too long in any one place, I was too tempting a target.

I didn't hear much after that; social alpinists pushed between me and them to hint for an introduction to this new director. They were calm about it because, after all, there'd been a new mastermind from the old country every week since a few years before the war. He might turn out to be nobody. But you couldn't take chances.

I'd heard enough, though, to make me agree with Jim that Mr. Di Lammermoor was almost certainly going to turn out to be somebody, and that that somebody was not named Di Lammermoor. I looked around for someone to talk this over with because I didn't like to make a move without advice. I couldn't pick out Olivia in the crowd, though you'd think a person with a two-inch skirt would naturally stick out in any gathering.

Velvet was conspiring with a waiter. She didn't generally bother with the help, but as she turned, his hand slid down in a manner that was very familiar, in a couple of ways. Laszlo had apparently gone to a much better makeup department than Jim. I wondered why Laszlo hadn't mentioned to us that he was going to be joining us at this party.

Sissy, meanwhile, was over in a corner with six men who were bringing *her* drinks. This always happens; they think the booze will go to her head. It does, but since it finds nothing to work with when it gets there, this makes no difference.

I wandered for a while, watching Di Lammermoor and taking orders, many of which I had no intention of fulfilling. I was here to spy and serve drinks, not to do other jobs. I was called over once to pass artistic judgment on a huge matted print of either a Greek god in agony or a guy who slept in the buff putting in his morning nose drops.

"Well," I said, "er, it's very, um, energetic."

"Huh!" said the man to the left of the photo, a round chap with a bad toupee. "It's all wrong! Look at the way that hair hangs down!"

"And the pose!" said a tall man with a long nose. "It makes him look deformed."

"It does, it does," agreed his companion. "Or double-jointed. I think I'd've hidden that picture in a closet somewhere if I was King."

"Maybe he just needed to fill wall space," I suggested. "At least he put it over here where the light's bad."

They both nodded. "Of course, the lighting in the picture is even worse," said long-nose.

These were not men involved in the artistic side of the industry, but I caught on in a second. The original of this picture stood about thirty feet away, on the other side of an animal-skin couch. He was a bit thicker in the middle and thinner on top than when this picture was taken, but he was surrounded by well-wishers. Howard had gotten out from in front of the camera and was now very big in cosmetics. His chief competitors were the two art critics I was busy agreeing with.

"I suppose he meant the arch of the back to echo that tree branch in the back," said round-and-bald. "But it just clashes."

"Bad composition," agreed his partner.

The way the job situation was around here, they couldn't afford to knock Howard himself; they might be working for him next year. So they were

taking it out on the picture. Nobody in this room would have thought that odd in the least. We all made our living from one kind of picture or another.

Almost all of us did. I spotted Di Lammermoor wiping his forehead as he studied a photo of four women entwined with a few twigs and vines and other floral ornaments. I excused myself from the judges' panel and sidled over to him.

"Your partner's had too much," I whispered. "His wig is slipping."

His head came around. "I told him . . ."

Then he realized what I'd done and came around to glare at me. It wasn't my fault. The police should know better than to send a nonactor to do an actor's job.

I had recognized him through a disguise. With me, there was only a change of clothes, so it took him no more than a second.

"Who are you, anyway?" he demanded, turning back into my blond police pal of this morning despite the black hair and mustache. "I know you. You were getting your picture taken this morning."

"Sure," I told him. "Everybody knows me. You've heard of the Sweater Girl? The Oomph Girl?"

"Yeah."

"I'm the Unemployed Girl."

An actor who was somebody when I was in pigtails came by, but he'd been around long enough to know you don't try to hit up a director for a job when the director is chatting with the maid. Director Di Lammermoor smiled on him as he moved on, and then glowered at me some more.

"What're you doing here?"

That was harder to come up with a smart answer for. I wanted to tell him just enough so he'd believe me, but not enough to give him an edge. He'd seen me with King during his embarrassment of the morning, so a completely innocent excuse would have made him very suspicious.

"The studio wants King watched so he doesn't try to make for the border or walk into some police trap," I shrugged. "I figured the first one was more likely, but now I don't know."

He turned a little red. "Listen," he said, pushing his face down toward mine and nearly tucking his chin into my cleavage, "the poison used on Cape was stuff that could be used in a darkroom."

I have an ear for dialogue; he'd said "could be." "Does King use the stuff?" I demanded.

He licked his lips. "We don't know."

I don't like cops licking their lips that close to my face. I took a step back and two to the side. "Shouldn't you be checking that before you put on fancy dress?"

"No," he snarled at me. "I need a good reason before I can get the paperwork to go looking in King's chemicals. The captain doesn't want us disturbing the good people at Mammoth Titan."

"You must be a master detective if he thinks you'd find any to disturb," I said. "So what did you learn so far? Not that I'm going to warn any hooded fiends; I just want to know whether or not to show up for work tomorrow."

He started to snarl at me again but paused. He hadn't thought of it that way up to now. "Well," he said, uncurling his lip, "we have some leads. You weren't at that party last night, by any chance?"

"Me?" I said. "Don't let this getup fool you. I haven't worked this kind of line regularly for two, three years."

"As a guest?"

"I'm not the kind of guest Cape invited to his parties. I might've been, this time next month. He only had room for bigger names."

He lifted an eyebrow. "That other waitress, what's her name? Velvet. She says different. She was there, and she's coming in to give evidence in the morning."

"She never mentioned that to me," I said. "But she doesn't tell me everything she does, thank God." I wondered if there wasn't some way I could divert his attention to something else. Anything else: if Peter King was arrested, Mammoth Titan could switch over to just re-touching the pictures of its stars. Hiring artists would cost something, but the expense could easily be made up by firing all the stand-in bosoms.

"Er, some people are talking about Cape's maybe being killed by spies," I said.

His eyes rolled up. "You're going to tell me that Velvet Whatshername is really the exotic spy queen Hata Mali."

"I was in that picture," I noted.

"Well, stick to that," he told me. "That's probably more your kind of job than surveillance."

"You're a pretty good one to talk about being in the wrong kind of work," I said.

He shrugged. "What else have you been in? I'll go see it."

"Nothing that's out. Except a double lemon juicer I posed for in '39. You could see it at your five and dime."

"My brother's got one of those." He moved back a little for a broader vista. "That's a step up from being just a pinup, I guess."

Before I could comment, I heard a familiar whistle. "Gotta go," I said. "If I can't do any police work, I better keep dishing out the drinks."

Olivia was also moving toward the bar. Velvet was not to be seen, but Sissy was very busy playing Crazy Eights with an older gentleman. "Now, in the last war," he was saying, setting a red eight on an ace of hearts, "we did creative things to sell bonds. We dropped a bunch of cardboard propellers from airplanes with a note to say God had sent a personal message to buy more if the propeller dropped on them."

"And did you sell many bunnies?" Sissy inquired. I decided it would be best not to disturb them.

"Listen," whispered Jim as we reached the bar, "who's that suspicious character Velvet's been talking to?"

"That's no suspicious character," said Olivia. "That's Laszlo."

"What you just said!" I told her.

She nodded. "I knew it the minute I heard it come out."

Jim's eyes were gleaming. "It all fits in," he said, rolling his

hands together. "But we left out an important suspect."

Olivia set an elbow on the bar. "We are simply agog to hear about it."

"King," he whispered, leaning at us. "That's how they pass messages, see? It's the numbers on the pictures. All we have to do is go around the room and write down all those dates in order."

Olivia and I looked at each other. "Is that all we have to do?" I said. "Really? How much of it can you do from behind the bar?"

"There's this picture here," he said, pointing at a plush red-head exposing her posh posterior on a sacrificial altar. "That can mark you guys' starting place."

"And here I thought you weren't going to help," sighed Olivia, gazing on the model's rumpish charms.

"Oh, you can count on me." He'd even found us a couple of good pencils, which he tucked into the most obvious holders he saw, patting a number of cocktail napkins in on top.

Olivia tossed her eyes toward me as we moved away from his place of business. "How are you holding up?" I asked.

"I need to take something for my nerves."

"What?"

"A cab home," she sighed.

"Yeah, I think the novelty's wearing off," I said. "Why are we doing this?"

"We could just walk out."

"We could. We were both walkons to begin with."

We stood waiting for one of us to be the first to go. We stood there long enough for Mrs. King to come up and snap, "We aren't paying you to look like statues. We could have *bought* statues." Minnehaha barked to reinforce this remark.

So we moved on, dispensing liquid cheer and jotting down the dates of King's pictures, checking every now and then to be sure no one had secreted an envelope with a swastika on it behind any of the matted masterpieces. This was a more perilous assignment than it may sound because this is a city where leaning against a wall is an important social skill. I don't know how Olivia explained her project away to the people she passed; my cocktail napkins were for lucky numbers. One or two of the guests slipped out napkins of their own and made notes of the digits to play. If this really was an Axis message, it was one of the least exclusive ones going.

I couldn't spot any pattern to the dates; they weren't in order by age or anything. For a while, I tried to test Jim's theory using the old 1 = A code, but that

didn't work out. Most of the years on these pictures were after '26, so the spies must have been using a special villain's alphabet.

I had taken down the date on about the fifteenth picture and was waiting for a couple giggling on the sofa to move on so I could check the one over their heads when I chanced to look up and met my own eyes. I remembered that session: King had swathed me in yards of transparent plastic. Some people called it art, but to me it was just a grocery ad: cheese-cake wrapped in cellophane.

"I bet you'd look good in a suit like that."

I'd been joined by "Silk" Harvey, a costume man who gets invited to parties less because of his work on the set than because of the odd jobs he'll do on the side, using leftover material belonging to whatever studio he's with at the time. I knew he'd designed collars for Minnehaha and other poodles around town. Sweaters, too: didn't do a thing for 'em.

He leaned in, a hand going flat on the wall, just to my right. "In fact, I bet you'd look good in anything. Or nothing. You could be a model, and after that, who knows?"

"It's what comes before that I'm worried about." I tried to slide to the left.

"I can explain that part," he said, his other hand slapping on the wall to block escape. "Where would you like to hear it? Your place? Mine? Or under that leopard skin there?"

There are people in this town I have to take seriously when they come out with a line like that. When he's had a bit too much, Silk forgets that he's not one of them.

"I have a drink for Mr. Di Lammermoor over there, sir," I said, trying to duck under his arms.

London Bridge came down a little to block me off. "I'm more interested in what you have for me."

I'd said "Di Lammermoor" loudly enough to attract the cop's attention, and summing up the situation, he started to move in. But before he reached us, rescue came from another direction. "It's early for the hunting season, Harvey," remarked a cold voice.

We looked up at our host. Peter King was completely unamused. "We do need them to serve drinks for a few more hours. You can set your traps out later."

Silk let his arms come back to his sides. "Hey, King!" he said. "Just in time! Trapped this particular server tryin' to lift pictures."

King's eyes slid to me. I said nothing. I knew he liked to make up his own mind.

"Yeah," Silk went on. "You know they're sellin' 'em for gold dust out east. I'd throw her out right now if I was you."

"Don't tell me my business."

The fake Di Lammermoor frowned, listening. "Listen," Silk insisted. "It's a plan. Don't you see her partner over there, looking behind every picture to see if . . . They're working together. Maybe you better send both of 'em away. I'll take 'em to the police station in my car."

King's eyes fastened on Silk. "Harvey, your eyes are bigger than your . . . stomach." The cop frowned some more.

I understood the problem: bad dialogue. Not only would it not have passed the Hays Office, but audience sympathy would swing toward the louse who, though cringing, was human, not like the cold, superior rescuer. There should've been some kind of foil to draw the audience's attention away from this.

"Has Silk been naughty?"

Mrs. King had stepped up to our merry band, still hanging onto her poodle. I wondered if maybe she'd just quit drinking, and keeping her hands full this way was designed to keep her from picking up a glass.

"Mr. Harvey was just leaving," the photographer informed her.

"Oh!" she said, so sharply that Minnehaha barked an echo. "But I wanted to talk to him about that special collar."

"Later, Mrs. King," snarled Silk. "Maybe much later." This was better; let the audience see he was the type who'd take his revenge through a poodle.

Mrs. King escorted him to the door, obviously trying to retrieve her order for something special. I couldn't spare them much attention. "You should not have moved into a spot where the sofa would block your escape," Peter King informed me. "You should know that sort of thing by now." He glanced at the picture above me. I knew the date as well as he did. "You've been working around here long enough to realize it." And then he walked away.

If I'd thought about it, I would have known he'd recognize me. King has no real interest in people, but he can remember every picture he's ever taken, and since quite a few of those involved people, he remembers them, too. I get the feeling he'd rather not, but he just can't help it.

The phony foreigner came up to get a drink from my tray.

"Whew!" he said. He wasn't referring to my near escape.

"How do guys like that marry women with poodles?" I said, not to the cop but to myself. I looked over at Mrs. King, who had closed the door behind Silk. She was talking quickly and furiously to Mrs. Cape, who threw a glance of venom at Peter King.

"Maybe she didn't tell him about the poodle," murmured Di Lammermoor.

She left Mrs. Cape and moved across to Velvet, petting Minnehaha as she moved. I could tell by the way her face had changed that she was saying pleasant things to Velvet, not snappy orders to a maid. And I could tell by Velvet's face that these things were pleasant to hear.

"Excuse me," I said to Di Lammermoor and pushed through the crowd.

I got close enough to hear just as Velvet said, "Oh, the poor dear doggie!" Poor dear doggie must have suspected this wasn't in character for Velvet because Minnehaha caught the extended hand in her teeth and then used those teeth for what they were made for.

"Naughty Minnehaha!" said Mrs. King as Velvet jerked back. She actually rapped the poodle on the nose with two fingers. This also seemed to me

to be out of character. That sort of thing is a clue, or at least it was when I was in *Dash Dorgan in the Hidden Valley* for fifteen of the sixteen chapters.

"You must let me tend to that," Mrs. King said, taking Velvet by the wrist.

"Oh, it's nothing, ma'am," Velvet insisted, though she didn't try to break free.

"Call me Moira," Mrs. King requested, and led her away.

I stood where I was for a second, seeing the whole plot unrolling before me as though it were lettered on caption cards. Jim was right, but, Jimlike, he had picked on the wrong people. Not King. Not Di Lammermoor. The spies were Laszlo, Velvet, Mrs. King, Mrs. Cape, and Silk Harvey. And the messages weren't coded on the pictures. They were tucked inside poodle collars. In what other city could that have worked?

Giving this some thought, I realized it wouldn't do to tell Jim. If he hadn't thought of it, it naturally couldn't be true. And Di Lammermoor, whatever his real name was, seemed to me to be the same sort of person. What I needed was concrete information. Maybe I'd get that if I joined this little story conference.

So I slipped along behind them, doing my best to remain inconspicuous carrying a tray

and wearing a yard of black gauze. They moved into the library, a room designed to look like a cave, with a lot of stucco and some polar bear skins for authenticity. Mrs. King pushed the door closed, but it didn't shut all the way. Glancing behind at the empty corridor for security, I bent over to peek through the crack.

"Is it still bleeding?" Mrs. King asked, directing Velvet to a white fuzzy couch.

"Oh, not at all, Moira," Velvet told her with a dazzling smile. "That lovely doggie couldn't really hurt anyone." Her uninjured hand was clenched in a fist, but Moira didn't see that.

"I feel simply dreadful," Mrs. King said, kneeling to study the bite. "Can you move your fingers?"

There was much of this fussing and apologizing and keeping Velvet's attention focused on Velvet, which is never very difficult. If they were going to talk spy stuff, they weren't in any hurry about it. I was getting a cramp in my back.

A little light showed in an alcove behind the couch. Mrs. Cape slipped in through another door back there. She held a cable release, one of those long black lines King uses to snap his shutter while standing free of the camera. One end was

in her right hand, and she flipped the other end up to her left hand as she slid to a spot just behind Velvet.

I'd seen this move in a dozen pictures. So, without intending to, I did what I had always done when I was in the scene. I screamed.

It was difficult to say whether Mrs. King or Mrs. Cape was more annoyed by this interruption. But it didn't matter because Velvet had them both beat.

"What do you think you're doing?" she bellowed, rising from the couch in such injured dignity that you'd've thought she was the hostess.

I considered possible explanations. The true one wouldn't do it at all. Mrs. Cape and Mrs. King would certainly deny it. And Velvet, if she was really a member of the spy ring, would never buy it either. If not, she'd simply assume I was lying. That's what she'd do in my place.

So I did. "A g-ghost!" I said, pointing at a dark corner.

"Oh, sure," sneered Velvet.

I moved in, my eyes round, not looking at any of them. "I feel a definite presence in this place," I explained, using my best spooky voice.

"Is it Wilson?" Mrs. Cape inquired.

I almost fell into the trap. But I didn't know Cape well enough to fake it, and that was the lie they were expecting. "No," I said, recalling something I'd heard earlier in the day. "It's a small animal. A dog or a cat."

"A . . . a dog?" demanded all three, with varying degrees of credulity.

"Yes," I said, walking on as if in a trance. "I believe it is." I took up a position next to the couch, where Velvet stood clenching and unclenching both hands. "This was not the dog's usual home, but a place the dog visited."

"Fifi!" cried Mrs. Cape. "Fifi!"

Minnehana barked and looked around. I was grateful, myself. You can't just go on saying "the dog," and I'd been unable to recall whether the Capes' late poodle was a he or a she.

"Something is troubling her," I said. "That's why she has returned. You should hold a seance to find out what her problem can be."

Mrs. Cape's hands were clutched at her chest; she seemed to have forgotten the cable release that was dangling from them. "Oh, can you do it?"

"No. But I know someone who can." I winked at Velvet, who unclenched her fists. "Velvet here is much more sensitive

to the spirits. Why, she probably attracted the dog spirit to this place."

Velvet was unsure how to take this. I had set up a situation that seemed to be rich with possibilities, but then I had turned it over to her. I seemed to be helping her, which was not unprecedented but certainly dubious.

"We'll need more people," Mrs. King announced. "I was wondering if we couldn't do something different to entertain them."

"Do hurry," said her friend. "Oh, I hope Fifi's not anyplace terrible!" Tears were starting in her eyes.

"Be sure to bring Mr. Di Lammormoor and his aide," I called after Mrs. King. A hand fell on my shoulder.

"Just what is it you're doing?" Velvet whispered.

"You're going to be mighty popular around here if you play your cards right," I said. "And you'll be able to help out your old friends. I know you can conduct a seance because I saw you do it in *Ghosts in the Desert*. And I know you can bark like a dog because Silk Harvey's been talking about it all over town."

Somehow she decided this was reasonable. My real plan wasn't even that structured. I just felt whatever was going on here might develop better in

the dark. Maybe during the seance, I could produce a few spirit voices to indicate that Mrs. Cape and Mrs. King had planned to strangle Velvet with the cable release to complete their incrimination of King. At the very least, once the lights were off I might be able to snatch Minnehaha's collar and get the latest message out.

There was a table under all the polar bears in this room, and soon we were seated around it with half a dozen guests who had been nearest the door when Mrs. King went in to round them up. These included Di Lammermoor, whose accent was slightly Swedish as he went on about "ghost who want justice," his aide, vaguely French, Sissy and her Crazy Eights partner, and a couple of extras. Mrs. King had brought candles, which I placed as far apart on the table as I could and still keep them within my reach in case I had to douse them in a hurry and make a run for it.

With a gypsy accent Di Lammermoor must have envied, Velvet announced, "De hands are linked, de circle iss complete. Let de spirits speak!"

Nothing happened. We sat for a minute, waiting for de spirits. Even Minnehaha, sitting on her owner's lap, was at-

tentive. I tried a little whine, pitched just a bit too high for me to hear, to see what Minnehaha thought of it. She put her front paws on the table.

"Minnehaha! What is it?" whispered Mrs. King. "Do you see her?"

"Fifi?" called Mrs. Cape.

"Silence, please!" insisted Velvet, scowling at the circle. She closed her eyes. "I feel a definite presence," she said. Velvet's a great ad-libber; only has to hear it once.

Her head came down. "Yes," she said as we all leaned in. "I feel . . . I feel . . . grrrrr-uff!"

"Fifi!" cried Mrs. Cape.

I thought Velvet gave it a little too much bass; it sounded more like a Great Dane. But we all have a personal style.

"Grr-up!" she said. "Gwup gwupf!" Silk hadn't done her justice.

While the rest of the audience was distracted, I gauged the distance from here to Minnehaha. Going for the collar didn't look like a good bet; I'd surely get bitten, and I couldn't see the buckle on the collar from here. For all I knew, it was booby-trapped with some Fu Manchu poison needle. Better to let Velvet finish her show and inject a few spirits.

"Gwup grr-up gwupf!" she said.

"Fifi!" Mrs. Cape called again. "Is it you, sweeters? Come to Mamma!"

"Come on, puppy!" Sissy called. "Come on, puppy!"

"Fifi!" screamed Mrs. Cape as the shadow of a dog passed between the candles.

"Look, Minnehaha!" Mrs. King squealed. "Look, it's Fifi! Minnehaha?"

She was right the second time. Hearing Sissy call, Minnehaha had jumped up onto the table and strolled over to find out what was going on. But Mrs. Cape had no way of knowing that.

"What is it, Fifi?" she cried, rising in excitement from her chair. "I killed him for you, Fifi. It hurt him just as much as you hurt, Fifi, after he kicked you!"

I sat back. Was that it? No Nazis? No secret messages? Just a guy who kicked dogs?

"He's dead, Fifi," she went on. "I killed him for killing you."

Yep. That was it. Her poodle. My career.

"We helped, Fifi," Mrs. King put in, equally entranced. "Minnehaha and I helped. We made it look as if Peter did it."

"Do you remember Peter, Fifi?" asked Mrs. Cape. "He doesn't like poodles, either."

It had never occurred to me to ask, but one felt that Peter wouldn't.

"What's wrong, Fifi?" Mrs. Cape demanded. "What else can I do? Do you want us to kill Peter?"

A door slammed. "What was that?" asked Mrs. King.

"The circle has been broken," snapped Velvet, sounding quite cross. Her show had been stolen from her. Let that teach her to work with animals.

The lights came on. The former Mr. Di Lammermoor stood by the switch. He was Di Lammermoor no longer, and had no sign of an accent as he ordered, "Don't anyone else try to leave the room, please."

We looked around the table to see who was missing. For a moment, the sight of Sissy clutching Minnehaha to a bosom just made for coddling poodles distracted us. Then we noticed that her companion, the Crazy Eights fan, wasn't at the table.

It turned out he was also there undercover; he was a newspaperman. This was a story that had to be reported. Oh, the newspapers were understanding to an extent; they were good enough to leave out any bits that would reflect on that bastion of moral values, Mammoth Titan Vital Studios, and its fine, homespun musical, *Little Brown Church*. This compassion had to be purchased, but there was enough left in

the budget for King's art to be funded at his old levels, which more than compensated for the arrest of his wife.

The only drawback was that this didn't leave a whole lot of money for making pictures that move. *Little Brown Church* came out as a B pic: two songs and a cast of tens. I was in it long enough to say, "Good morning, pastor," which three words at least bumped me into a higher pay bracket than

Sissy, who merely giggled.

I had seventeen seconds of screen time, which was really just as well, for I was very busy. "Got you something at Schukraft-Mauro," said Cal as I came off the set. "Working title's *Pretty as a Picture*; you're a photographer's model who gets knifed in the second reel. You get to scream a lot. You've always been one of my best screamers."

There's a reason.

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UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

*Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?
The answer will appear in the March issue.*

During a severe winter storm, the Sparrow Airlines plane en-route to San Diego was forced to land at the emergency field at Lane Mule Crossing, Nevada. Wiping the frosted windows, the seven nervous passengers looked out at the raging blizzard.

The man from Omaha spoke up. "Looks like we're stranded for God knows how long. Let's head for the hangar."

The passengers—whose last names were Hager, Inge, Jackson, Kilroy, Lang, McDuff, and Napier—braced themselves against the bitter wind and trudged through the driving snow into the unheated hangar, which also served as the terminal.

Shivering, one of the passengers remarked, "I see a bar across the street. It's bound to be heated."

Thus, the seven waded through the snowdrifts and entered the warmth of the Jackrabbit Saloon. They had little in common, since each came from a different town and followed a different profession. But each had a whisky from the grinning bartender, who was delighted with this unexpected upsurge in business.

(1) Lacking anything better to pass the time, four of the passengers drew up chairs at the big round table in the barroom, someone produced a deck of cards, and they began playing Hearts. Bill sat opposite Mr. McDuff, with the farmer on his left and the gentleman from Utica on his right.

(2) Al asked to join and inserted his chair to the left of the electrician and to the right of Mr. Napier.

(3) The game grew more exciting, so Mr. Kilroy joined to make six. He sat to the right of the chef, the left of the grocer, and opposite the man from Quebec. "Let's make it interesting," said Kilroy. "Say, a penny a point?"

(4) At this time, Mr. Hager had Mr. Jackson on his left and Ed on his right, and sat opposite Mr. Lang.

(5) Don had the man from Reno on his right and the man from Pittsburgh on his left. "Enough of this penny-ante game!" he de-

clared. "How about a nickel a point?" Reluctantly, the other five agreed.

(6) Finally Chet could stand it no longer. He got into the game to complete seven. He did not sit next to Mr. Jackson or Mr. Lang. Instead, he pushed his chair to the table so that he was on the left of Frank and on the right of the doctor.

(7) Three players—Mr. Inge, the artist, and the man from Toronto—never sat one next to another.

(8) George started the game but ended up between Mr. Hager and Mr. McDuff (the latter distrusting the man from San Antonio). The man from Omaha did not start the game.

(9) During the entire game, the artist never sat next to Mr. Hager or the man from Reno.

(10) As the game progressed, the stakes grew higher and tempers grew shorter. Suddenly, the barber (who was not from San Antonio) yelled at the man on his right, "You're cheating!" He rose from his chair and smashed it over the latter's head, killing him instantly. The other players recoiled in horror.

They blamed it on the blizzard. "That's what really started it all," someone declared.

"Sheep dip!" snorted the sheriff of Lame Mule Crossing as he scooped the money from the table as "evidence."

*How were they seated at the fatal ending of the game?
And what were the names of the hot-headed
killer and his victim?*

FICTION

OFF THE WALL

by Neil Jillett

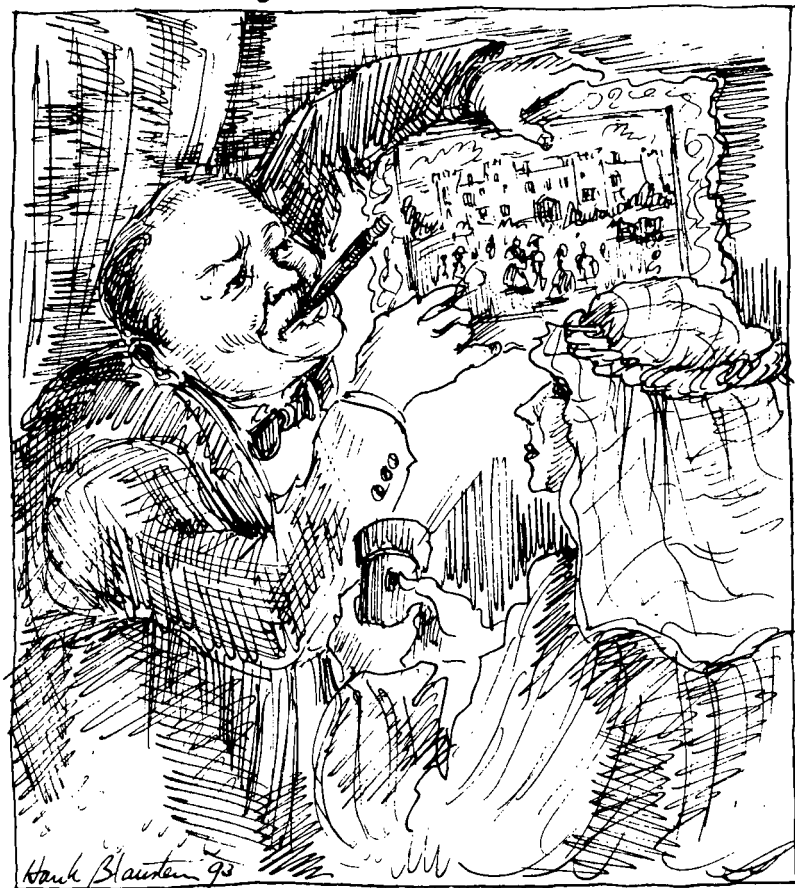


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Beryl and I have always made friends easily, whether it is with a couple who have just moved into Tulip Avenue or another Mozart enthusiast with whom we have struck up a conversation during the interval at a concert. As soon as we find new people to our liking, we invite them to dinner.

We enjoy presiding over a table laden with good food and wine and encouraging discussion on all manner of topics. But the best part is after the meal, over coffee, port, and brandy, when one of our new friends says, "How lovely. Canaletto, isn't it?" Even if the words vary slightly from speaker to speaker, the gist is always the same. So when one guest, too generously plied with the Chianti we had served with the pasta, declared, "That's a Cannelloni," everyone knew what he meant.

Whatever way they identify the painting, our guests usually add; "It must be a . . ." They pause, aware that a small timber bungalow in middle-class suburban Melbourne is an unlikely home for an original by the eighteenth century Venetian master.

You can almost see the wheels going round. It would be impolite, they are telling themselves, to suggest that the only

Canaletto we could possibly afford would be a reproduction. . . . But perhaps the painting is an heirloom. Not wanting to appear rude or ignorant, they end up being both.

For a few moments we let them fret about finishing a question they wish they hadn't started to ask. Then I put them out of their misery by explaining, "We stole the painting from Borchester Castle, on a visit to England a few years ago."

That stops them in their tracks, I can tell you. And, as they sit open-mouthed, Beryl puts her arm around my waist, and we pose for a moment, looking very smug.

"I helped Bill steal it," she chuckles, "but I must admit he did most of the planning."

"It was a team effort," I insist, giving her a peck on the cheek to acknowledge her share in what, as regular filmgoers, we have come to call between ourselves *The Canaletto Caper*. "I just had to be a dead statesman for a few hours."

"And I was a male silent movie star," Beryl says on cue. "Dead, too, of course."

This conversation takes place in the library we built into the high-pitched roof of our house, soon after we came back to Australia. The painting was in the library in Borchester Cas-

tle, and we wanted it to feel at home. Not, of course, that we could provide the musty splendor it enjoyed in that dour pile. Still, if most of the shelves are occupied by paperbacks rather than by frayed leatherbound volumes, and the floor is covered with seagrass matting, not with moth-eaten Persian carpets, our library does have good views, and after dinner we invite our guests up there, ostensibly to look at the twinkling lights of Melbourne's skyscrapers on the horizon. We don't draw attention to the painting; we just wait for someone to notice it, softly lit by a shaded lamp on the wall behind the desk.

Although the kind of people with whom we make friends can usually pick a Canaletto from a Guardi or a Magritte from a Dali, knowledge of that order does not equip them to respond calmly or articulately to our confession of having stolen a painting that they reckon must be worth at least a million dollars.

"Would you like to hear the story?" I ask.

They nod, and as I get into my narrative stride, Beryl quietly pours coffee and refills glasses that have been abruptly emptied during the shocked silence that follows our confession.

*

In 1989 (I tell our new friends), soon after our retirement as high school art teachers, Beryl and I made our first trip to Europe.

Canaletto is our favorite artist, although we have never quite fathomed why his orderly, detailed studies of eighteenth century scenes give us so much pleasure. As we had never seen an original by him, we intended to visit places, such as Harewood House, in Yorkshire, that have collections of his work. But first we were to spend several months with our only child Erica in Borchester.

She had gone to Oxford for advanced studies in some esoteric corner of medieval history, but fell in love with and married Nigel Stortford, also a post-graduate student. They abandoned plans for academic careers when Nigel's widowed father died, leaving him a weekly local newspaper and a job-printing firm in the Midlands town of Borchester. Although these businesses were efficiently run by a loyal staff, Nigel and Erica decided to assume what they called "hands-on control" and make their home in Borchester (which, as you probably know, is pronounced Booster, to rhyme with Worcester):

The town, set in softly rolling country, has a population of around thirty-five thousand and is a nice enough place if you like a quiet life. In the late Middle Ages and for several centuries beyond, Borcester flourished as a center of the wool trade, and towards the end of the eighteenth century the exploitation of mineral springs (since proved to be medically worthless) led to the town's becoming for more than a hundred years a fashionable place at which to take the waters.

Borcester's architecture combined, according to prewar guidebooks, the Tudor quaintness of Chester with the Georgian elegance of Bath, and attracted many foreign tourists and day-trippers from larger towns in the area. This popularity was ended by the Luftwaffe in 1942. On several raids intended to demoralize the English as much as to ruin their nation's industrial base, German bombs destroyed most of the town's fine buildings, including the thirteenth century cathedral, the fifteenth century guildhall, and the exquisite Regency theater. The most notable survivor was Borcester Castle.

"Poor Borcester Castle," Erica said soon after we arrived. "Good Queen Bess didn't sleep

there, although Queen Victoria complained in her diary about the lumpy sauce with the fish she had for lunch on the south terrace."

"Our castle hasn't even got a ghost," Erica's husband said, "let alone any of the gory and crucial episodes that people like Richard III, Edward II, and Lady Jane Grey, or their allies and enemies, contributed to Warwick Castle."

"The locals do take some pride in the fact that Borcester was the seat of a dukedom," Erica said, "while Warwick only ran to earls."

"The last duke died of alcohol poisoning about forty years ago, and the first duke was a spineless ninny—earned the title by accepting as his own the son sired on his wife by Charles II." Nigel sighed at the thought of such cynical opportunism. "It's a mark of Borcester's failure to be, as it were, in the historical mainstream that neither the conception nor the birth took place within its walls."

Nigel explained that Warwick Castle, besides being so much more attractive historically, was a sort of tourist double act. "Bus tours from London to Warwick also go to Stratford-upon-Avon. Against the attractions of Shakespeare's birthplace and Warwick Cas-

tle's bloody history, Borcester doesn't stand a chance."

"You should go to Warwick first—it's quite close—and then you'll see what we mean," Erica advised. "Borcester, though, does have something that will very much appeal to you two. But I'll let you find out for yourselves, after you've been to Warwick."

So a few days later Beryl and I borrowed Erica's hatchback and made the hour's drive to Warwick, where, for all the castle's long and colorful history, the main attraction turned out to be a reconstruction of something that happened less than a hundred years ago.

Since 1978 Warwick Castle has been owned by the people who run Madame Tussaud's Wax Works in London. They've turned several rooms into the scene of a houseparty given by the Earl and Countess of Warwick in the summer of 1898. Various famous guests, or excellent wax replicas of them, are shown playing cards, listening to a recital by the contralto Clara Butt, chatting in the library, dressing for dinner. Among the guests are the Prince of Wales, the Dukes of Marlborough and York, Field Marshal Lord Roberts, and Winston Churchill, then only twenty-four but already fa-

mous for writing about his own military exploits.

"He could almost be you," Beryl said as we looked at Churchill, who was leaning against the back of a tall armchair and reading a book. "Even if he was then little more than a third the age you are now."

A few days later we went to Borcester Castle, which has a layout similar to Warwick Castle but is much less impressive because it attracts far fewer visitors to help pay for its upkeep. A flimsy information leaflet told us, "In the 1920's, one of the many glorious periods in this castle's exciting history, British and international celebrities often gathered here for parties. The tableau in the Great Crimson Library shows how a typical scene might well have looked in the Age of the Flapper and Jazz."

The Edwardian houseparty at Warwick Castle had inspired the financially strapped custodians of Borcester Castle to aim for a similar effect, but Madame Tussaud's had clearly not had a hand in the result. The dusty curtains in the Great Crimson Library had been drawn, and the artificial lighting was very dim, presumably to save on electricity bills as well as in an attempt to hide the fact that the dummies,

their putative identities indicated by a diagram near the door, were as lifeless as... well, as lifeless as dummies.

Anna Pavlova crouched in the middle of the room, in the final throes of *The Dying Swan*, a performance ignored by all the other guests except Charlie Chaplin, who, dressed as the Little Tramp, seemed about to give the ballerina a thrashing with his cane. D. H. Lawrence, with beard and hair that matched the crimson curtains and wallpaper, sat at a desk, working on a manuscript labeled, in huge letters, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Guglielmo Marconi, plugged into what looked suspiciously like an early model Sony Walkman, was inventing the wireless in a corner, while Nancy Astor and a top-hatted Lloyd George were having a political discussion or a lovers' tiff. There must have been more than ten other dummies crowded into the room, but I don't recall whom they were supposed to represent.

Except for two.

"There you are again, sitting beside Rudolf Valentino," Beryl said, pointing to two dummies on a couch on the far side of the room. Only their heads and shoulders were visible above the couch's high back. One of the dummies was supposed to represent the silent

film star in his famous role as The Sheik. "That Churchill looks more like you," Beryl added, "if you know what I mean, although—"

"Yes, he's balder and fatter than the Churchill at Warwick Castle," I interrupted impatiently. Then, almost of its own accord, my voice sank to an awed whisper. "But see what's on the wall in front of them."

"Canaletto," Beryl whispered back. "It must be what Erica said would very much appeal to us."

The painting was of Borchester Castle as it could no longer be viewed, standing boldly on a slight rise and not hemmed in by the ugly houses that had been built after the German bombing. Gentlemen in cocked hats and ladies in hooped skirts strolled on the grassy slopes below the walls, while children gathered around a Punch and Judy show.

I broke our worshipful silence after five minutes. "I'd love a closer look."

Beryl pointed to the rope strung across the door. From it dangled a scrawled notice: *Keep out*. But I hopped over it and gave the exquisite painting a close inspection for thirty seconds, before threading my way back among the dummies.

"This 'historical' display's really cheapskate," I said. "Those

dummies on the couch haven't even got legs; just heads and torsos." Over dinner that evening Erica said, "It's a disgrace. Even if the Canaletto's about the only real treasure in the castle, security's terribly slack."

"That's supposed to be a secret, darling," Nigel grumbled.

"From my own mother and father!"

"Sorry, darling." Nigel's face was a study as annoyance fought sheepishness. Then he decided that politeness towards his in-laws was more important than secrecy. "A chap I know is on the committee that's supposed to look after the castle, which was willed to the town by the alcoholic last duke. According to my friend, the alarm system at the castle's permanently on the blink, and the committee can't afford to hire security guards after midnight."

"Why?" I asked.

"The duke didn't leave any money for upkeep, and admission charges barely cover that, as you might have noticed from the run-down state of the place. A few lesser art works were sold to raise money, but that was years ago."

"And the Canaletto?"

"They'd love to sell it, too, but there are no buyers in England, and selling it abroad

would be a breach of National Heritage laws."

When Beryl suggested that his newspaper should campaign to correct this situation, Nigel put on his owner-editor hat. "As a journalist, it's my duty to thunder that something must be done; on the other hand, as a citizen of Borchester, I can't see my way clear. Publicizing the poor security at the castle could attract vandals. Or—" and he grinned at Beryl and me "—the unwelcome attentions of people who might like to acquire a Canaletto for themselves."

In bed three hours later I asked, "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Yes," Beryl said, "and I don't see why it should be all that difficult."

"Let's sleep on it."

That brief exchange illustrates why our marriage is so happy. Oh, we've had our petty rows, but when it comes to important matters, such as deciding to introduce serious crime into our otherwise law-abiding lives, we reach immediate agreement, as if by telepathy. Even when we're asleep.

The first thing I said when I woke up the next morning was, "You could be Valentino." I cupped Beryl's olive-skinned, fineboned face in my hands.

"And you could be Churchill," she replied, ruffling my few remaining strands of hair.

At breakfast we told Erica and Nigel that we were off to London for a few days, for shopping and to see some shows.

But, instead of behaving like tourists, we bought a book about Canaletto that contained an excellent reproduction of the painting of Borchester Castle, commissioned by the third duke while the artist was working in England, around 1752. According to the book, the painting was one of Canaletto's smallest, only fifteen by twenty inches. We bought artist's materials, since my unimaginative proficiency in oils was vital to our plan. While I settled to my task in our hotel room, Beryl bought other necessities, including wigs, a false mustache and some second-hand clothes.

Our chief worry was that the castle, especially in the colder months—it was the end of autumn—did not attract enough visitors with whom we could unobtrusively mingle. But we learnt that every Wednesday and Thursday the castle admitted the elderly without charge, hoping, rather fruitlessly as it turned out, that in gratitude they would buy overpriced tea and buns in what passed for a cafe and such souvenirs as beer

mugs, bookmarks, and handkerchiefs, all emblazoned with the Borchester coat of arms. Throughout Wednesdays and Thursdays busloads of people from retirement homes and pensioners' clubs visited the castle.

Over the next four weeks we made several reconnaissance trips. Each time, wearing different clothes and wigs, we passed ourselves off as members of the bus parties. We planned to steal the painting by entering the castle with a Wednesday afternoon pensioners' party and leaving with a Thursday morning party. We would explain our absence to Erica and Nigel by saying we were going to Stratford to see a Shakespeare production and had booked into a hotel to avoid a late-night journey back.

"You're sure we should go ahead with this Churchill-Valentino idea?" Beryl asked on the Sunday before we took to crime. "Perhaps we could hide in a cupboard or under a bed?"

"You're scared of mice—there's bound to be whole packs of them in dark corners—and I hate confined spaces."

"Or behind a door?"

"Our legs couldn't take that standing up for hours."

"You're right," Beryl said. "I was just giving you a chance to

back out, if you were getting cold feet."

I laughed at such a ridiculous idea.

"Good," she said, giving me a hug. "Hiding under a bed or behind a door would make it a routine robbery. Our scheme turns it into a real caper."

Late on Wednesday morning, with my forged Canaletto rolled into a tube in our suitcase, we set off in Erica's car.

"Hope you enjoy *Othello*," she said, "though I don't suppose *enjoy's* the right word for watching a man smother his wife."

Behind a tree in a quiet lane we changed into our second-hand clothes, then continued to the neighboring town of Colversham, put the car into overnight parking, and returned to Borecoster by the branch-line train that runs around the district. We didn't have to wait long before a busload of pensioners arrived. Having visited the facilities—though we both have remarkably strong bladders for our age (touch wood!) and hadn't had a drink all day—we dawdled along at the end of the group and were the last to peer into the Great Crimson Library.

Under my scarf and raincoat, I was wearing a gray jacket, a wing-collared shirt, and a blue tie similar to Churchill's, and it

took Beryl only a minute to put on the Arab headdress (actually a small tablecloth and a skein of yellow wool) that covered most of Valentino's face and shoulders. At four thirty, with our feet up on the couch, legs side by side, our discarded garments and the heads and torsos of Churchill and Valentino piled around us, we began our wait, praying that we would not sneeze in that dusty room, or get cramps, or giggle as we stared, as the dummies had done, into each other's eyes. The first half hour, while the last of the visitors walked past, was the worst.

The dim electric light was turned off at five thirty when all the day staff went home. We had assumed that, even on a tight budget, there would be two or three guards on duty, but only one, a man of about sixty, seemed to be doing the rounds. Every hour he returned to the library. We steadfastly failed to blink as his torch flickered across our faces. We suspected that he went off early because he didn't reappear after ten o'clock, but to be on the safe side we didn't move or speak for another three hours.

Then, while Beryl shone the torch she had brought in her handbag, I unhooked the painting and eased the canvas out of the frame. Removing it from

the stretcher and replacing it with my forgery, which we secured with thumbtacks, was much easier than we had hoped.

At nine o'clock, knowing the first of the castle staff came on duty at nine fifteen, I changed my appearance with a bushy mustache, and Beryl put on a blue-rinse wig. Then we returned the dummies to their upright position on the couch, tied the stolen painting around my waist under my raincoat (the way we had brought in the forgery), and hid behind the library door. It was, as I'd warned, so cramped we were glad we'd spent the night in comparative comfort on the couch.

The first busload of pensioners arrived at ten forty-five—nerve-rackingly later than we had counted on and only just in time for us to be back home, as we had promised, for lunch with Erica.

That evening Nigel said, "You'll be glad to hear the castle can now afford a proper alarm service and full-time security guards."

"So the Canaletto's safe now?" Beryl asked cheekily.

Nigel gave her what we recall in retrospect as an odd look. "I suppose so."

"Where did the money come from to pay for these safety measures?" I asked.

"Some anonymous benefactor, I gather," Nigel said vaguely.

And that's where we end our story except to answer some obvious questions from our guests. How, for example, did we get the painting to Australia?

"We did copies of a few other paintings we admired on our travels," I explain, "and rolled them up in a tube as hand luggage. We weren't asked to open it when we went through Customs."

"And if we had been," Beryl adds, "we were sure it wouldn't have occurred to anyone that an original might be among them."

Another common question is whether we are worried that someone will repeat to the police the story we'd told.

"That," Beryl says, looking more intimidating than hostesses are supposed to look, "would be a breach of our confidence and of our hospitality. Not something we would expect from our friends."

But of course someone did go to the police. Inspector Thomas, from Melbourne CIB, called a few months ago. He was apologetic yet firm. "We've received certain information. It sounds rather improbable, but I'm afraid I must ask you a few—"

How I admired the savour faire with which Beryl interrupted him. "A few questions, inspector, about a painting stolen from Borchester Castle in England? Some people will believe anything. Please come upstairs and I'll show you."

"Very nice," he said. "Pretty old, is it?"

"About three years," I said. You see, when we returned to Melbourne, Beryl made a copy of the Canaletto. I don't think she'll be offended if I say I am the slightly better artist, and her copy is not quite as convincing as the one I did for Borchester Castle. Except when we have guests for dinner, Beryl's copy hangs in the library, as a decoy for any visiting police. It would take a lot of explaining if two "Canaletto" paintings by the same hand, mine, were found to be in existence—one in Borchester, the other in Melbourne—if the theft was uncovered.

Having admired Beryl's copy, Inspector Thomas said, "I'm quite partial to a bit of leg-pull myself, and you two seem to have dreamt up a beauty to fool your friends."

"Just a bit of harmless fun, inspector," Beryl said.

"But my superiors may still want me to chase it up through Scotland Yard."

We had always known that was a risk, although we had persuaded ourselves it was unlikely to arise. Several worrying weeks went by, long enough for us to assume that the matter had been dropped, without Melbourne CIB's bothering to get in touch with Scotland Yard. Then came a telephone call from Inspector Thomas. "I thought you'd just like to know that Scotland Yard checked with Borchester Castle about that painting."

I felt as if my heart had stopped. "I thought that might happen, inspector."

"And of course the castle confirmed that the whatsisname—"

"The Canaletto," I gulped.

"Yeah, the Canaletto. They confirmed it's still hanging in, in—sorry, I can't read my own handwriting."

"The Great Crimson Library."

"Yeah. I thought you might like to know, though it can hardly be news to you."

"Hardly, inspector," I said, with what I hoped was the right touch of injured innocence. "But thank you for calling. Goodbye."

I hung up the phone and fainted.

Beryl, who was pruning roses, heard the thump and found me on the floor. No dam-

age done apart from a sprained wrist.

A fortnight later we had a letter from Erica, mainly about her progress towards being a mother for the first time.

"I finally prised out of Nigel the facts about that mysterious benefaction the castle received to pay for its security system," she wrote on the last page. "They sold the Canaletto! It's a big secret—the painting went to one of those collectors in Japan who acquire art treasures and hide them in vaults where only they can look at them. As far as I can work out, you must have been among the last people to see it, since it was sold a week after your first visit to the castle. A copy has been put in its place, and I must say that if I didn't know otherwise, I'd think it's the original.

"A few weeks ago a story went around that the Canaletto

had been stolen. Didn't that put the wind up the people on the castle committee! Terrified they'd been found out, though of course, as Nigel says, they feel the secret sale of the painting was the right thing to do. Anyway, they persuaded Scotland Yard that all was well, without having to submit the fake for expert examination. Don't let on I've told you. Nigel would shoot me, even though I am pregnant. . . ."

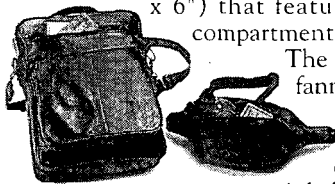
So when we tell new friends how we stole a painting from Borchester Castle, we always stop at the point where we have it safely back in Melbourne.

Perhaps it would make a better story if we told the whole truth. But Beryl and I were art teachers. It wouldn't do our pride any good to admit we mistook a copy of a masterpiece for the real thing.

MAIL ORDER MALL

LEATHER LUGGAGE

Do you love the look of exquisite leather but hate the price tag? If so, this incredible offer is perfect for you. Read on for the details of these four handsome pieces of top grain genuine black leather. First, there is a stunning yet totally functional canvas lined carry-on. Compact (18" x 6" x 15") and lightweight yet spacious, this sleek carry-on features seven exterior compartments and two roomy interior pockets. Durable construction, a double handle with grips and adjustable, detachable shoulder strap make this the perfect luggage piece for any trip. Second, hand-some detailing and sturdy construction make our Knapsack second to none. It measures (12" x 5.5" x 15") and the roomy main compartment closes with a draw string and buckle flap while three extra pockets offer plenty of extra room. Brass rivets and double stitching reinforce stress point areas. So functional yet so good looking—this knapsack is in a class by itself. Third, there is a tailored black leather men's shoulder bag that makes a classic fashion statement. The sleek design is a perfect size (9.5" x 12" x 3") and features a spacious zippered main compartment with 1 inside and 2 outside zippered pockets. The adjustable shoulder strap is detachable, and the bag can be carried by its sturdy grip handle. Lastly, there is a deluxe black leather zippered fanny pack (10" x 3.5" x 6") that features both an extra zippered outside compartment and a hidden zippered back pocket.



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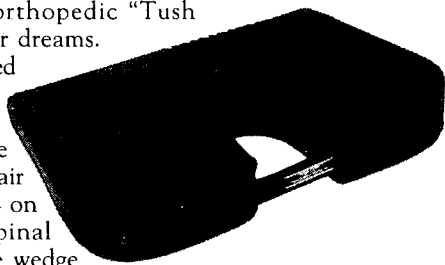
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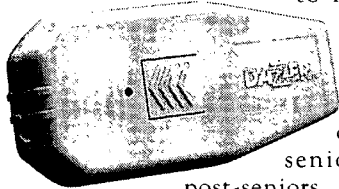
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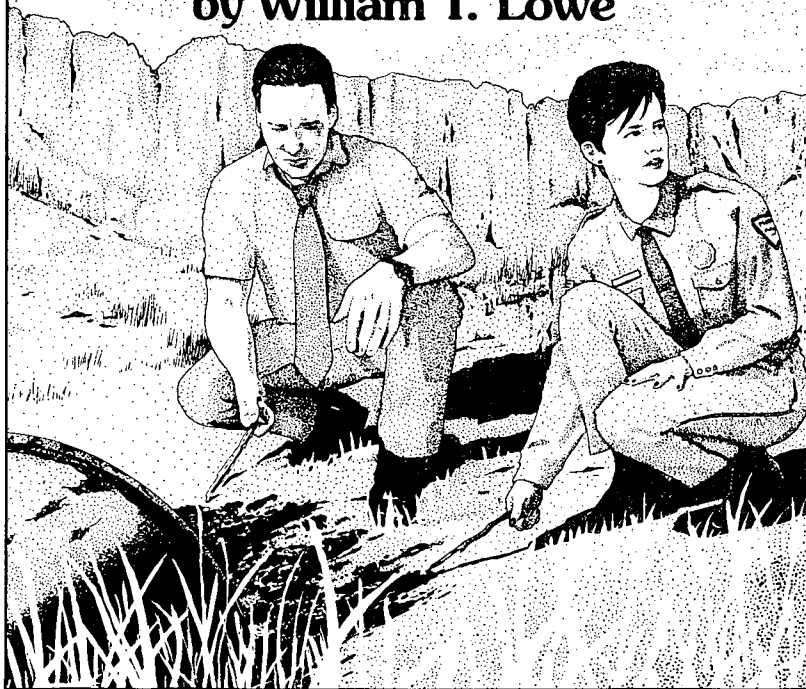
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The LAND HEALERS

by William T. Lowe



A very pretty young woman opened the door to Rory's office and gave him a brilliant smile. "Got a minute?" she asked.

Rory frowned at the interruption; his desk was over-

loaded. But he said, "Sure, April. Come on in."

The girl was tall and slender, with deep blue eyes and jet black hair cropped short in a youth's haircut. She wore the uniform of the newly formed

Mohawk police force; in fact, she looked poured into it. There was no sidearm on her wide leather belt, but a large utility pouch was slung over one hip.

"Thanks, chief," she said. "Davie's got something to show you."

A boy of about fourteen had followed her into the office. He had a Mohawk's dark features and stocky build. He was holding a coffee can with both hands. He crossed the room, placed the can on the desk, and stepped back.

Rory leaned forward and peered into the can. It was empty except for a large hypodermic syringe. The syringe was crusted with dirt, and the inside of the barrel was coated with a dark brown stain that could have been blood.

The needle looked very bright and very sharp. Rory looked up at the boy. "You didn't touch this, did you, Davie?"

"No, sir. I used two sticks to pick it up."

"That was smart. Where did you find it?"

"By the creek on my grandfather's place. My dog was chasing a rabbit."

Rory looked at the syringe again. Hospitals and doctors with very sick patients used large needles like this. Where did this one come from?

"Did you tell anybody about this, Davie?"

"No, sir. Only April. I showed it to her, and she said we should bring it to you."

Rory glanced at the girl and nodded. "Good thinking."

She gave him another smile. April Summers was fresh out of college and a probationary member of the force. She had a charming manner, and the visitors to the reservation loved her despite the occasional traffic tickets she handed out.

"Tell Mr. Horn what else you found, Davie," she said.

"I saw two more of these," said the boy, "and some other stuff. Bandages and things. April said you ought to know because you're in charge of the environment."

"Not exactly," Rory said. "I help clean up the pollution." The sign on his office door read:

ST. REGIS MOHAWK TRIBE
Environmental Studies
Rory Horn, Director

Years ago big industries near Massena in upstate New York had disposed of manufacturing waste by dumping it into a nearby river, the Raquette. The waste contained PCB and other noxious chemicals that contaminated the rivers and soil on the Akwesasne reservation.

After thirty years the pollution had reached alarming, even life-threatening, levels. Now, after thousands of water and soil samples had been analyzed and hundreds of committee meetings had been held, the cleanup was finally under way. Rory's job was to coordinate the effort between the manufacturers, the EPA in Washington, and the DEC in Albany.

Now here in the coffee can on his desk was a new form of pollution—used hypodermic syringes—and it wouldn't wait for a committee.

April and Davie were looking at him expectantly. "Saddle up, chief," April urged. "We've got tracks to make."

Rory pushed aside the files on his desk and stood up. He locked the can in a cabinet and looked at Davie. "You'd better show me where you found this thing."

Rory's jeep was parked at the side of the Mohawk Community Building. He held the door open while April folded herself into the back seat.

"Thanks, chief."

"Don't call me chief," Rory said. "Douglas Solomon is a chief. Noble Frankland and Mike Lean are chiefs. I'm not a chief."

She grinned at him impishly. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

Davie hopped in beside Rory. The August sun was beginning to bake the pavement as Rory drove down Hogsburg's Main Street. Midmorning traffic was light; later in the day tourists would come by to buy souvenirs and tax-free gasoline and tobacco.

Many of the Mohawk men were employed off the reservation as high steel workers, raising the skyline of Manhattan still higher. A number of women worked at the Tru-Stitch shoe factories in Malone and Bombay.

Rory drove past the shops and the big casinos and turned left onto Cook Road. This paralleled the course of the St. Regis River as it and the Raquette flowed through the reservation and into the St. Lawrence, the international waterway.

Rory had majored in environmental science; he had graduated the same year the federal Superfund Cleanup Bill was passed. Since then he had seen small animals die, birds drop out of the air, fish become unfit to eat, all because of the PCB contamination.

Now cleanup efforts had begun, but they had to be controlled. Fishing and hunting and a whole way of life had to be restored, not destroyed.

He was driving past empty fields dozing in the summer

heat. To the left a line of trees marked the path of the river. Eagles once nested in those trees, and their feathers were still used in tribal ceremonies.

Along the river were burial sites that must be protected. Under the trees grew flagroot, a plant used for medicinal purposes, and the aromatic sweet grass that was highly prized by the women in weaving their intricate baskets. Rory couldn't let those things fall prey to hungry bulldozers.

Davie pointed and Rory slowed the jeep. Tire tracks angled away from the road to follow a high bank above a stream.

"Down there," Davie said.

Rory stopped and they got out. A glance at a survey map told him this was Turtle Creek. Now, in summer, the stream was dry, the bank steep and overgrown.

From the edge of the bank they could see the stream bed. It was choked with weeds and alders that almost concealed two fifty gallon drums. Broken weeds showed the path the drums had made as they rolled down the bank.

"April, follow those tracks," Rory ordered. "Davie, you stay put."

He slid down the bank, the heels of his half boots digging into the dried mud. The cover

of one drum had come off; the tightly packed contents had spilled out on the ground.

Rory saw more syringes, blood-soaked dressings, scalpels, empty and half-empty vials. He prodded the mass with a stick and uncovered a torn warning label that read *Infectious Material*.

He felt a surge of anger at whoever had so little regard for human life as to dump dangerous and possibly lethal material where someone could stumble into it. Thank God the stream is dry, he thought, or this stuff could have been spread for miles.

April came down to stand beside him, a serious look on her young face. "Hospital waste, right?"

"Right," Rory growled.

April made a disgusted sound. "Think what might have happened if Davie had stepped on one of those needles. Or another kid had started playing with them. What kind of person would do this?"

Rory shook his head. They climbed back up the bank where Davie was waiting for them. "You find anything?" Rory asked April.

"Four more drums farther down. Any idea where this came from?"

Rory nodded. "All the printing on those drums has been

spray-painted to hide it, but I did make out the letters MA."

"Massachusetts," offered Davie.

"Right. Maybe one of the hospitals in Boston." Rory put his hand on the boy's arm. "Listen, Davie, we've got to keep this quiet until we clean it up, all right?"

"You got it, Mr. Horn."

"What do we do next, chief?" April asked.

"Don't call me chief," Rory said absently, and then he looked at her in surprise. "We? I thought you were on traffic detail."

She turned to face him. "I want in on this, Mr. Horn. I know I'm just a rookie, but I want to help nail someone for this. Can you get me assigned to your office?"

Rory hesitated and then nodded. This girl didn't have much experience, but she did have determination. And he could use some help. "All right. I'll get back to town and call the DEC in Syracuse to get a disposal team up here." He moved toward his jeep. "And I'll call Mark Benjamin; he's BCI."

April knew that was the NYS Bureau of Criminal Investigation. Rory handed her his radio. "Call your sergeant and do what you have to do to seal off this area."

"Right." April was looking down at the stream bed and its odious burden. "Who could do something like this?" she burst out suddenly. She turned to Rory. "I can't be impersonal about this! This is more than just a crime! It's, it's . . ."

He touched her arm. "I know what you mean." She was feeling the same sense of outrage he had experienced many times. Softly he said, "Our great-grandfathers believed that any defilement is an injury to the land. And the land must be healed."

April nodded. "I remember," she murmured, "... because the land is mother to us all." For a moment they stood in silence, watching the heat waves shimmering on the horizon. Then she gave him a brilliant smile. "Let's go to work, chief."

"Don't call me chief," Rory said as he stepped into his jeep. "Come on, Davie, we've got things to do."

On the way back to town Rory drove by the site of one of the test wells. "There's a sensor down there that monitors the ground water," he explained to Davie. "That way we'll know if the pollution gets any worse, and we can do something about it."

"Suppose the water does get real dirty?"

"We can pump it out and clean it."

All the remedial work should be that simple, Rory thought. We can remove contaminated soil or water and clean it or replace it, but that takes time, lots of time. Maybe someday there'll be a shortcut. He knew work was in progress to find a chemical way to neutralize the toxic effects of PCB.

"Until we get it licked, we've got to keep the pollution from getting any worse."

"I read you, Mr. Horn," Davie said.

Twenty-four hours later the stream bed had been hygienically cleaned. Men in plastic suits had collected all the drums and loaded them into a large trailer. They had shoveled up the spilled waste and a considerable amount of the dirt around it. Everything would be transported to an incinerator near Rochester.

April had met the disposal team at the south border of the reservation and escorted them to the site without attracting attention. Everyone worked quickly, remembering the near panic that had resulted when hypodermic needles washed up on public beaches a few years before.

Mark Benjamin had driven up from his office in Syracuse.

He had been a friend of Rory's father, and he was still Uncle Mark to Rory and his family.

Dressed in a dapper three-piece suit in spite of the heat, Mark looked like a successful real estate salesman. But some residents of Attica and Dannamora had learned that beneath the silver hair and friendly smile was a lawman with the tenacity of a bulldog.

Rory and Mark stood on the bank and watched as the men secured the last of their gear. April climbed the bank to join them. Mark watched her approach with an appreciative eye for her trim figure.

Rory made the introductions. "Mark Benjamin, meet Officer April May Summers."

The name caught Mark by surprise. "You're kidding!"

"No, he's not," April said. Ever since high school her name had spawned innumerable jokes. "That's my real name," she said grimly.

Quickly Mark held out his hand. "Glad to know you, officer."

"April will be watching this for me," Rory explained. "I've got a top-level meeting with some Washington brass two days from now."

Mark nodded and looked at April appraisingly. She bristled under his gaze. "You think

I'm too young for the job, Mr. Benjamin?"

Mark shook his head. "No, not too young," he said with a grin. "Maybe too pretty."

In spite of herself April blushed.

"Now then, Officer Summers," Mark said briskly, "how do you see the problem?"

April frowned, concentrating on her answer. "These drums we found are fiberboard, not steel. They're not heavy. The hospital waste is all lightweight material. That says one man can handle a loaded drum. He can drop it out of a truck and roll it anywhere. Down a bank like this, for instance."

Mark nodded in agreement, and April went on. "We found two drums here and two drums at each of the two other spots. Two drums at a time says a small van or a panel truck. To me that adds up to one trip at a time by one man in one vehicle."

Mark nodded again. "That's the way I read it." Rory saw the sudden smile on April's face. "Just two suggestions," Mark said. "This person may be using more than one dump site here on the reservation. You might check out some other likely spots."

"Being done now," April said.

"And tell your Warrior leaders what's going on. They can

be a big help in watching for a vehicle with any of the New England plates. There may be another load in the pipeline now."

"Already done," April said. The Warriors were the militant arm of the Mohawks; their mission was to protect the sovereignty of the Mohawk nation.

They walked back to the road where Rory's jeep was parked. "We found enough scraps of labels to know this stuff came from hospitals in the Boston area," Mark said.

He turned to face April. "We've seen this kind of thing before. The hospital thinks it's dealing with a legitimate disposal service. The front man has all sorts of credentials. But once the refuse is picked up, the gang takes this kind of action." He gestured at the ditch behind them.

"And dumps it where some child could get into it."

Mark noted the anger in April's voice. "Don't worry," he said. "We'll get whoever's responsible."

Rory had a question. "Remember last year when you caught those people dumping asbestos on the Onondaga reservation? Why do people think they can take advantage of Indians like this?"

"Don't get riled, son," Mark said. "Reservations have been

open territory that's not patrolled or protected. This bum thinks he's found an ideal place to dump illegally." Mark turned to April. "And that was his first mistake, right, Officer Summers?"

She smiled grimly. "Right, Mr. Benjamin. If he comes back we'll be ready for him."

Rory dropped Mark in the parking lot of the Bear's Den Restaurant and went on to his office. There was a message for him to call Chief Douglas Solomon.

"Will we be ready for the senator and his party day after tomorrow?" the chief asked.

Rory was tempted to ask for a delay, but it was out of the question. There were still decisions to be made about the cleanup work, and he had to speak for the tribe.

"Yes, chief, we'll be ready." Rory called his wife and said he wouldn't be home for dinner.

April's voice on the phone was excited. "I've got a pickup with a camper top and Mass plates out here on Cook Road. Could be our boy!"

It was ten thirty. The meeting with the party from Washington was at eleven. "You handle it," Rory said. "Get Jake to help you."

"No time," April said. "Jake's over on Cornwall Island. This guy is headed for the same spot by Turtle Creek. When he sees we've worked it over, he'll turn around and split. I'll hold him as long as I can, but come a-runnin', chief!"

The line went dead. "Damn!" Rory slammed the phone down. His door opened and Chief Solomon walked in, looking as always like an investment banker.

"Don't worry, Rory," the chief said, "I'll handle the delegation until you get back. Go on and take care of that scum."

Rory stared at him in amazement. "How did you know . . ."

"April called me first. She knew you might hesitate. That's a smart gal. Now go."

Rory found April crouched behind the hood of a police car and pointing a shotgun at a little man standing in front of a small camper. The car was swung across the road, blocking the truck's passage. The man in front of the camper was very well dressed, and he seemed very relieved to see Rory.

"How do you do, sir," said the little man, smiling. Rory noticed he was not sweating even though he was wearing a jacket. "I'm glad you're here. I'm afraid there's a little mis-

understanding with this young lady. She won't let me pass, and I am in a bit of a hurry."

The little man seemed completely at ease. Rory wondered if April had made a mistake. But the man's accent was pure New England. Let the girl play out her hand, he decided.

"I'm Charles Wakefield, at your service, sir," the man continued smoothly. He offered Rory a card which Rory made no move to accept. "Custom hair styling. Best little shop on Boston's East Side, if I do say so."

"Hi, chief," April greeted him from behind the car. "Would you please go and look inside that rig?" There was a tremor in her voice, but her grip on the gun was steady.

Rory ignored the title "chief" and walked over to the rear of the pickup.

"Sir, you can't do that," the little man said primly. "That would constitute a search, and you have to have a warrant for that."

"You're on an Indian reservation here, Charlie," April said to him, "and we make our own rules."

Rory smothered a grin as he opened the back of the camper. Inside were two familiar fiber-board drums. He looked back at April and held up two fingers.

"Oh, I see," the little man said pleasantly. "You think I might have been planning to discard those containers. I was just doing a favor for a friend." He shrugged elaborately. "He said it would be all right to drop them off. Or maybe I got the wrong road."

He moved toward the door of his truck, but April raised the barrel of her shotgun. He stood quite still.

In a very surprised tone he said, "Oh, I understand. That would have been a misdemeanor, wouldn't it?" He smiled at April and Rory. "Well, just let me pay a fine, and I'll be on my way." His hand dipped into his pocket and came out with two fifty dollar bills showing between his fingers.

He edged closer to Rory and extended his hand. "Let me settle up for the trouble I may have caused. Here, you and the little lady have a good time for yourselves."

Rory shook his head. He saw that Charles Wakefield was beginning to perspire.

"Let's have one of those drums out here," April said, "and see what Charlie has been carrying around."

Rory eased one of the drums down to the pavement. The lid was secured by a metal strap. He opened it and lifted the lid.

The drum was packed with hospital waste, needles, sponges, bandages, bloody refuse. He tilted the drum so April could see the contents, then replaced the lid.

April shook her head. "Charlie, you should know that stuff is dangerous." She paused and the little man looked beseechingly at Rory. "Who sent you up here, Charlie?" April asked.

There was the sound of a car on the road behind them. A jeep with two men in it coasted to a stop beside Rory's vehicle. Both men were Mohawks, both wore army camouflage uniforms, both carried weapons. They were Warriors; the larger man was Jake Hightower, one of the Warrior leaders.

They walked forward and stood beside April. Jake looked at the shotgun, and April handed it to him quickly. To Rory Jake said, "Solomon got me on the radio." He looked at the little man dispassionately. "Who's this?"

"This is Charlie," April said. "He's been dumping hospital waste." To the little man she said, "Once more, Charlie, who sent you up here?"

The man wiped his forehead. "You can't arrest me! It isn't even my truck!"

April shook her head. "You disappoint me, Charlie." She stepped out from behind the

cruiser and walked over to the drum of waste. She wrenched off the top and held it in front of her as she looked at the contents. Then she slammed the lid shut and walked back slowly, holding something in her hand.

"Take off your jacket," she said to Charlie.

"I won't!" His voice was a squeak.

"Help him, Jake."

The two Warriors moved to either side of Charlie and helped him out of his jacket. Jake's big hands remained on his arms, holding him in a vise-like grip.

April stepped closer to the man and slowly raised her hand. She was holding a large hypodermic syringe, its barrel filled with a red liquid. She held it upright in front of his face. He watched, fascinated, as she pressed the plunger and a drop of red appeared at the tip of the needle.

"What, what is that?" he squeaked.

"You ought to know, Charlie, you brought it up here. Now let's try that question again. Who are you working for?"

He shook his head, sweat running into his collar. "You can't do this . . ."

April shook her head. "Have it your way, Charlie." The needle glinted in the sunlight as

she brought the syringe closer and closer. Charlie strained against the hands that held him.

Rory was alarmed. He had been amused by April's performance, but now maybe she was going too far. He took a step closer, ready to interfere.

April was only two inches taller than the man, but she seemed to tower over him. She lowered the syringe to his forearm, the needle an inch away from his skin.

In a soft voice April said, "My great-grandfather would call this getting shot with your own arrow."

"All right!" Charlie said suddenly. "All right! This isn't worth a C-note!" He looked from Jake to Rory frantically. "I'll tell you the deal, but get this chick away from me. She's crazy, you know that?"

"This guy calls me about twice a month. I meet him at the Liberty Bar and Grill. He tells me where to make the pickup, and he gives me a hundred for each run. Sometimes an extra twenty as a bonus..."

He talked for several minutes. Finally Rory said, "That's enough. Take him and hand him over to the state police down on Route 37."

The two Warriors escorted Charlie Wakefield to their jeep.

Then Jake Hightower turned and walked back to Rory and April.

He picked up April's shotgun and frowned at her. "You're on probation, Summers. You know you're not supposed to carry firearms," he said sternly.

"I know, Jake," April said in a little girl voice. "It's my brother's. I just borrowed it. Please don't tell the sergeant."

Jake said nothing but handed the gun to Rory. He pointed at the syringe that April had dropped on the hood of the car. "You want to tell me about that?"

April picked it up. "Oh, this?" She pressed the plunger and emptied the red liquid into the palm of her hand. "It's Kool-Aid," she said. "Cherry flavor."

"And you had the needle in your bag," Jake said. "I thought so." Rory saw the ghost of a smile on his face as he turned to leave.

"Hold on a minute, Jake," Rory said. "What April did was illegal, you know. It was entrapment or intimidation or something. The police will never be able to hold him."

"Yeah, maybe," Jake said slowly. "But look at it this way: we used the sparrow to catch the hawk. Right?"

"Right," April said eagerly.

"Right," said Rory slowly.

Jake put his hand on April's shoulder. "Not bad, rookie," he said.

"Thanks, Jake."

They watched the two Warriors drive away with their prisoner. Rory looked at his watch. It was after twelve. He looked at April. "What did you need me for? I didn't do anything."

April turned away from him. "How did I know Jake would get here?" she asked in a very small voice. "And I knew you would back me up, no matter what." Her voice broke, and Rory looked at her in surprise. He saw her eyes were filling with tears.

"I was afraid . . . I've never done anything like that." Her lips were quivering and her hands shaking. Rory reached out and put his arms around her and held her until the tears and the trembling subsided.

Much later that afternoon Rory and Mark Benjamin sat over cups of coffee in the Bear's Den. "It was a clean sweep," Mark was saying. "Everybody connected with that hospital waste dumping is behind bars."

He paused and looked out the window. A tourist family was having its picture taken with a tall, very pretty girl in a Mohawk police uniform.

"How was your meeting?" Mark asked Rory.

"We're getting there," Rory said. "The parts per million levels are still a big issue. But by the time we're through, we'll have a clean environment."

April appeared in the doorway. She looked around and then walked over to their booth.

"Nice work, officer," Mark said gravely.

"Thank you, Mr. Benjamin," April said. She looked at Rory. "I'm afraid I came unglued there at the end," she said ruefully.

Rory shook his head. "Forget it."

"Look, April May," Mark said gently. "You and Rory are both doing the same job, protecting your land. That's worth getting uptight about."

She gave him a grateful smile. "Thanks." To Rory she said, "Well, I guess that makes us partners, doesn't it, chief?"

"Yes, it does," said Rory, "only don't call me . . . oh, never mind."

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Genuine Tabard

by E. C. Bentley



Illustration by Laurie Davis

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It was quite by chance, at a dinner party given by the American naval attaché, that Philip Trent met the Langleys, who were visiting Europe for the first time. During the cocktail time before dinner was served, he had gravitated towards George D. Langley because he was the finest-looking man in the room—tall, strongly-built, carrying his years lightly, pink of face, with vigorous, massive features and thick grey hair.

They had talked about the Tower of London, the Cheshire Cheese, and the zoo, all of which the Langleys had visited that day. Langley, so the attaché had told Trent, was a distant relative of his own; he had made a large fortune manufacturing engineers' drawing-office equipment, was a prominent citizen of Cordova, Ohio, the headquarters of his business, and had married a Schuyler. Trent, though not sure what a Schuyler was, gathered that it was an excellent thing to marry, and this impression was confirmed when he found himself placed next to Mrs. Langley at dinner.

Mrs. Langley always went on the assumption that her own affairs were the most interesting subject of conversation; and as she was a vivacious and humorous talker and a very handsome and good-hearted woman, she usually turned out to be right. She informed Trent that she was crazy about old churches, of which she had seen and photographed she did not know how many in France, Germany, and England. Trent, who loved thirteenth century stained glass, mentioned Chartres, which Mrs. Langley said, truly enough, was too perfect for words. He asked if she had been to Fairford in Gloucestershire. She had; and that was, she declared with emphasis, the greatest day of all their time in Europe; not because of the church, though that was certainly lovely, but because of the treasure they had found that afternoon.

Trent asked to be told about this; and Mrs. Langley said that it was quite a story. Mr. Gifford had driven them down to Fairford in his car. Did Trent know Mr. Gifford—W. N. Gifford, who lived at the Suffolk Hotel? He was visiting Paris just now. Trent ought to meet him, because Mr. Gifford knew everything there was to know about stained glass and church ornaments and brasses and antiques in general. They had met him when he was sketching some traceries in Westminster Abbey, and they had become great friends. He had driven them about to quite a few places within reach of London. He knew all about Fairford, of course, and they had a lovely time there.

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On the way back to London, after passing through Abingdon, Mr. Gifford had said it was time for a cup of coffee, as he always did around five o'clock; he made his own coffee, which was excellent, and carried it in a thermos. They slowed down, looking for a good place to stop, and Mrs. Langley's eye was caught by a strange name on a signpost at a turning off the road—something Episcopi. She knew that meant "bishops," which was interesting; so she asked Mr. Gifford to halt the car while she made out the weather-beaten lettering. The sign said "Silcote Episcopi ½ mile."

Had Trent heard of the place? Neither had Mr. Gifford. But that lovely name, Mrs. Langley said, was enough for her. There must be a church, and an old one; and anyway she would love to have Silcote Episcopi in her collection. As it was so near, she asked Mr. Gifford if they could go there so she could take a few snaps while the light was good, and perhaps have coffee there.

They found the church, with the parsonage nearby, and a village in sight some way beyond. The church stood back from the churchyard, and as they were going along the footpath they noticed a grave with tall railings round it; not a standing-up stone but a flat one, raised on a little foundation. They noticed it because, though it was an old stone, it had not been just left to fall into decay, but had been kept clean of moss and dirt, so you could make out the inscription, and the grass around it was trim and tidy. They read Sir Rowland Verey's epitaph; and Mrs. Langley—so she assured Trent—screamed with joy.

There was a man trimming the churchyard boundary hedge with shears who looked at them, she thought, suspiciously when she screamed. She thought he was probably the sexton; so she assumed a winning manner, and asked him if there was any objection to her taking a photograph of the inscription on the stone. The man said that he didn't know as there was; but maybe she ought to ask vicar, because it was his grave, in a manner of speaking. It was vicar's great-grandfather's grave, that was; and he always had it kep' in good order. He would be in the church now, very like, if they had a mind to see him.

Mr. Gifford said that in any case they might have a look at the church, which he thought might be worth the trouble. He observed that it was not very old—about mid-seventeenth century, he would say—a poor little kid church, Mrs. Langley commented with gay sarcasm. In a place so named, Mr. Gifford said, there had probably

been a church for centuries farther back; but it might have been burnt down, or fallen into ruin, and replaced by this building. So they went into the church; and at once Mr. Gifford had been delighted with it. He pointed out how the pulpit, the screen, the pews, the glass, the organ case in the west gallery were all of the same period. Mrs. Langley was busy with her camera when a pleasant-faced man of middle age, in clerical attire, emerged from the vestry with a large book under his arm.

Mr. Gifford introduced himself and his friends as a party of chance visitors who had been struck by the beauty of the church and had ventured to explore its interior. Could the vicar tell them anything about the armorial glass in the nave windows? The vicar could and did; but Mrs. Langley was not just then interested in any family history but the vicar's own, and soon she broached the subject of his great-grandfather's gravestone.

The vicar, smiling, said that he bore Sir Rowland's name, and had felt it a duty to look after the grave properly, as this was the only Verey to be buried in that place. He added that the living was in the gift of the head of the family, and that he was the third Verey to be vicar of Silcote Episcopi in the course of two hundred years. He said that Mrs. Langley was most welcome to take a photograph of the stone, but he doubted if it could be done successfully with a hand camera from over the railings—and of course, said Mrs. Langley, he was perfectly right. Then the vicar asked if she would like to have a copy of the epitaph, which he could write for her if they would all come over to his house, and his wife would give them some tea; and at this, as Trent could imagine, they were just tickled to death.

"But what was it, Mrs. Langley, that delighted you so much about the epitaph?" Trent asked. "It seems to have been about a Sir Rowland Verey—that's all I have been told so far."

"I was going to show it to you," Mrs. Langley said, opening her handbag. "Maybe you will not think it so precious as we do. I have had a lot of copies made, to send to friends at home." She unfolded a small typed sheet, on which Trent read what follows:

Within this Vault are interred
the Remains of
Lt.-Gen. Sir Rowland Edmund Verey,
Garter Principal King of Arms,
Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod

and
Clerk of the Hanaper,
who departed this Life
on the 2nd May 1795
in the 73rd Year of his Age
calmly relying
on the Merits of the Redeemer
for the Salvation of
his Soul.

Also of Lavinia Prudence,
Wife of the Above,
who entered into Rest
on the 12th March 1799
in the 68th Year of her Age.
She was a Woman of fine Sense
genteel Behaviour,
prudent Oeconomy
and
great Integrity.

"This is the Gate of the Lord:
The Righteous shall enter into it."

"You have certainly got a fine specimen of that style," Trent observed. "Nowadays we don't run to much more, as a rule, than 'in loving memory,' followed by the essential facts. As for the titles, I don't wonder at your admiring them; they are like the sound of trumpets. There is also a faint jingle of money, I think. In Sir Rowland's time, Black Rod's was probably a job worth having; and though I don't know what a Hanaper is, I do remember that its clerkship was one of the fat sinecures that made it well worthwhile being a courtier."

Mrs. Langley put away her treasure, patting the bag with affection. "Mr. Gifford said the clerk had to collect some sort of legal fees for the Crown, and that he would draw maybe seven or eight thousand pounds a year for it, paying another man two or three hundred for doing the actual work. Well, we found the vicarage just perfect—an old house with everything beautifully mellow and personal about it. There was a long oar hanging on the wall in the hall, and when I asked about it the vicar said he had rowed for All Souls College when he was Oxford. His wife was charming, too. And now listen! While she was giving us tea, and her husband was

making a copy of the epitaph for me, he was talking about his ancestor, and he said the first duty that Sir Rowland had to perform after his appointment as King of Arms was to proclaim the Peace of Versailles from the steps of the Palace of St. James's. Imagine that, Mr. Trent!"

Trent looked at her uncertainly. "So they had a Peace of Versailles all that time ago."

"Yes, they did," Mrs. Langley said, a little tartly. "And quite an important Peace, at that. We remember it in America, if you don't. It was the first treaty to be signed by the United States, and in that treaty the British government took a licking, called off the war, and recognized our independence. Now when the vicar said that about his ancestor having proclaimed peace with the United States, I saw George Langley prick up his ears; and I knew why.

"You see, George is a collector of Revolution pieces, and he has some pretty nice things, if I do say it. He began asking questions; and the first thing anybody knew the vicareess had brought down the old King of Arms' tabard and was showing it off. You know what a tabard is, Mr. Trent, of course. Such a lovely garment! I fell for it on the spot, and as for George, his eyes stuck out like a crab's. That wonderful shade of red satin, and the Royal Arms embroidered in those stunning colors, red and gold and blue and silver, as you don't often see them.

"Presently, George got talking to Mr. Gifford in a corner, and I could see Mr. Gifford screwing up his mouth and shaking his head; but George only stuck out his chin, and soon after, when the vicareess was showing off the garden, he got the vicar by himself and talked turkey.

"Mr. Verey didn't like it at all, George told me; but George can be a very smooth worker when he likes, and at last the vicar had to allow that he was tempted, what with having his sons to start in the world, and the income tax being higher than a cat's back, and the death duties and all. And finally he said yes. I won't tell you or anybody what George offered him, Mr. Trent, because George swore me to secrecy; but as he says, it was no good acting like a piker in this kind of a deal, and he could sense that the vicar wouldn't stand for any bargaining back and forth. And anyway, it was worth every cent of it to George, to have something that no other curio hunter possessed. He said he would come for the tabard next day and bring the money in notes, and the vicar said very

well, then we must all three come to lunch, and he would have a paper ready giving the history of the tabard over his signature. So that was what we did; and the tabard is in our suite at the Greville, locked in a wardrobe, and George has it out and gloats over it first thing in the morning and last thing at night."

Trent said with sincerity that no story of real life had ever interested him more. "I wonder," he said, "if your husband would let me have a look at his prize. I'm not much of an antiquary, but I am interested in heraldry, and the only tabards I have ever seen were quite modern ones."

"Why, of course," Mrs. Langley said. "You make a date with him after dinner. He will be delighted. He has no idea of hiding it under a bushel, believe me!"

The following afternoon, in the Langleys' sitting room at the Greville, the tabard was displayed on a coat hanger before the thoughtful gaze of Trent, while its new owner looked on with a pride not untouched with anxiety.

"Well, Mr. Trent," he said. "How do you like it? You don't doubt this is a genuine tabard, I suppose?"

Trent rubbed his chin. "Oh yes; it's a tabard. I have seen a few before, and I have painted one, with a man inside it, when Richmond Herald wanted his portrait done in the complete getup. Everything about it is right. Such things are hard to come by. Until recent times, I believe, a herald's tabard remained his property, and stayed in the family, and if they got hard up they might perhaps sell it privately, as this was sold to you. It's different now—so Richmond Herald told me. When a herald dies, his tabard goes back to the College of Arms, where he got it from."

Langley drew a breath of relief. "I'm glad to hear you say my tabard is genuine. When you asked me if you could see it, I got the impression you thought there might be something phony about it."

Mrs. Langley, her keen eyes on Trent's face, shook her head. "He thinks so still, George, I believe. Isn't that so, Mr. Trent?"

"Yes, I am sorry to say it. You see, this was sold to you as a particular tabard, with an interesting history of its own; and when Mrs. Langley described it to me, I felt pretty sure that you had been swindled. You see, she had noticed nothing odd about the Royal Arms. I wanted to see it just to make sure. It certainly did not belong to Garter King of Arms in the year 1783."

A very ugly look wiped all the benevolence from Langley's face, and it grew several shades more pink. "If what you say is true, Mr.

Trent, and if that old fraud was playing me for a sucker, I will get him jailed if it's my last act. But it certainly is hard to believe—a preacher—and belonging to one of your best families—settled in that lovely, peaceful old place, with his flock to look after and everything. Are you really sure of what you say?"

"What I know is that the Royal Arms of this tabard are all wrong."

An exclamation came from the lady. "Why, Mr. Trent, how you talk! We have seen the Royal Arms quite a few times, and they are just the same as this—and you have told us it is a genuine tabard anyway. I don't get this at all."

"I must apologize," Trent said unhappily, "for the Royal Arms. You see, they have a past. In the fourteenth century Edward III laid claim to the kingdom of France, and it took a hundred years of war to convince his descendants that that claim wasn't practical politics. All the same, they went on including the lilies of France in the Royal Arms, and they never dropped them until the beginning of the nineteenth century."

"Mercy!" Mrs. Langley's voice was faint.

"Besides that, the first four Georges and the fourth William were kings of Hanover; so until Queen Victoria came along, and could not inherit Hanover because she was a female, the arms of the House of Brunswick were jammed in along with our own. In fact, the tabard of the Garter King of Arms in the year when he proclaimed the peace with the United States of America was a horrible mess of the leopards of England, the lion of Scotland, the harp of Ireland, the lilies of France, together with a few more lions, and a white horse, and some hearts, as worn in Hanover. It was a fairly tight fit for one shield, but they managed it somehow—and you can see that the arms on this tabard of yours are not nearly such a bad dream as that. It is a Victorian tabard—a nice, gentlemanly coat, such as no well-dressed herald should be without."

Langley thumped the table. "Well, I intend to be without it, anyway, if I can get my money back."

"We can but try," Trent said. "It may be possible. But the reason why I asked to be allowed to see this thing, Mr. Langley, was that I thought I might be able to save you some unpleasantness. You see, if you went home with your treasure, and showed it to people, and talked about its history, and it was mentioned in the newspapers, and then somebody got inquiring into its authenticity, and found out what I have been telling you, and made it public—well,

it wouldn't be very nice for you."

Langley flushed again, and a significant glance passed between him and his wife.

"You're damn right, it wouldn't," he said. "And I know the name of the buzzard who would do that to me, too, as soon as I had gone the limit in making a monkey of myself. Why, I would lose the money twenty times over, and then a bundle, rather than have that happen to me. I am grateful to you, Mr. Trent—I am indeed. I'll say frankly that at home we aim to be looked up to socially, and we judged that we could certainly figure if we brought this doggoned thing back and had it talked about. Gosh! When I think—but never mind that now. The thing is to go right back to that old crook and make him squeal. I'll have my money out of him, if I have to use a can opener."

Trent shook his head. "I don't feel very sanguine about that, Mr. Langley. But how would you like to run down to his place tomorrow with me and a friend of mine who takes an interest in affairs of this kind and who would be able to help you if anyone can?"

Langley said, with emphasis, that that suited him.

The car which called for Langley next morning did not look as if it belonged, but did belong, to Scotland Yard; and the same could be said of its dapper chauffeur. Inside was Trent, with a black-haired, round-faced man whom he introduced as Superintendent Owen. It was at his request that Langley, during the journey, told with as much detail as he could recall the story of his acquisition of the tabard, which he had hopefully brought with him in a suitcase.

A few miles short of Abingdon the chauffeur was told to go slow. "You tell me it was not very far this side of Abingdon, Mr. Langley, that you turned off the main road," the superintendent said. "If you will keep a lookout now, you might be able to point out the spot."

Langley stared at him. "Why, doesn't your man have a map?"

"Yes, but there isn't any place called Silcote Episcopi on his map."

"Nor," Trent added, "on any other map. No, I am not suggesting that you dreamed it all; but the fact is so."

Langley, remarking shortly that this beat him, glared out of the window eagerly; and soon he gave the word to stop. "I am pretty sure that is the turning," he said. "I recognize it by these two haystacks in the meadow, and the pond with osiers over it. But

there certainly was a signpost there, and now there isn't one. If I was not dreaming then, I guess I must be now." And as the car ran swiftly down the side road he went on, "Yes; that certainly is the church on ahead—and the covered gate, and the graveyard—and there is the vicarage, with the yew trees and the garden and everything. Well, gentlemen, right now is when he gets what is coming to him. I don't care what the name of the darn place is."

"The name of the darn place on the map," Trent said, "is Oak-hanger."

The three men got out and passed through the lych-gate.

"Where is the gravestone?" Trent asked.

Langley pointed. "Right there." They went across to the railed-in grave, and the American put a hand to his head. "I must be nuts!" he groaned. "I *know* this is the grave—but it says that here is laid to rest the body of James Roderick Stevens, of this parish."

"Who seems to have died about thirty years after Sir Rowland Verey," Trent remarked, studying the inscription; while the superintendent gently smote his thigh in an ecstasy of silent admiration. "And now let us see if the vicar can throw any light on the subject."

They went on to the parsonage; and a dark-haired, bright-faced girl, opening the door at Mr. Owen's ring, smiled recognizingly at Langley. "Well, you're genuine, anyway!" he exclaimed. "Ellen is what they call you, isn't it? And you remember me, I see. Now I feel better. We would like to see the vicar. Is he at home?"

"The canon came home two days ago, sir," the girl said, with a perceptible stress on the term of rank. "He is down in the village now; but he may be back any minute. Would you like to wait for him?"

"We surely would," Langley declared positively; and they were shown into the large room where the tabard had changed hands.

"So he has been away from home?" Trent asked. "And he is a canon, you say?"

"Canon Maberley, sir; yes, sir, he was in Italy for a month. The lady and gentleman who were here till last week had taken the house furnished while he was away. Me and cook stayed on to do for them."

"And did that gentleman—Mr. Verey—do the canon's duty during his absence?" Trent inquired with a ghost of a smile.

"No, sir; the canon had an arrangement with Mr. Giles, the vicar of Cotmore, about that. The canon never knew that Mr. Verey was a clergyman. He never saw him. You see, it was Mrs. Verey who

came to see over the place and settled everything; and it seems she never mentioned it. When we told the canon, after they had gone, he was quite took aback. 'I can't make it out at all,' he says. 'Why should he conceal it?' he says. 'Well, sir,' I says, 'they was very nice people, anyhow, and the friend they had to see them here was very nice, and their chauffeur was a perfectly respectable man,' I says." Trent nodded. "Ah! They had friends to see them."

The girl was thoroughly enjoying this gossip. "Oh yes, sir. The gentleman as brought you down, sir—" she turned to Langley—"he brought down several others before that. They was Americans, too, I think."

"You mean they didn't have an English accent, I suppose," Langley suggested dryly.

"Yes, sir; and they had such nice manners, like yourself," the girl said, quite unconscious of Langley's confusion, and of the grins covertly exchanged between Trent and the superintendent, who now took up the running.

"This respectable chauffeur of theirs—was he a small, thin man with a long nose, partly bald, always smoking cigarettes?"

"Oh yes, sir; just like that. You must know him."

"I do," Superintendent Owen said grimly.

"So do I!" Langley exclaimed. "He was the man we spoke to in the churchyard."

"Did Mr. and Mrs. Verey have any—er—ornaments of their own with them?" the superintendent asked.

Ellen's eyes rounded with enthusiasm. "Oh yes, sir—some lovely things they had. But they was only put out when they had friends coming. Other times they was kept somewhere in Mr. Verey's bedroom, I think. Cook and me thought perhaps they was afraid of burglars."

The superintendent pressed a hand over his stubby mustache. "Yes, I expect that was it," he said gravely. "But what kind of lovely things do you mean? Silver—china—that sort of thing?"

"No, sir; nothing ordinary, as you might say. One day they had out a beautiful goblet, like, all gold, with little figures and patterns worked on it in colors, and precious stones, blue and green and white, stuck all round it—regular dazzled me to look at, it did."

"The Debenham Chalice!" exclaimed the superintendent.

"Is it a well-known thing, then, sir?" the girl asked.

"No, not at all," Mr. Owen said. "It is an heirloom—a private family possession. Only we happen to have heard of it."

"Fancy taking such things about with them," Ellen remarked. "Then there was a big book they had out once, lying open on that table in the window. It was all done in funny gold letters on yellow paper, with lovely little pictures all round the edges, gold and silver and all colors."

"The Murrane Psalter!" said Mr. Owen. "Come, we're getting on."

"And," the girl pursued, addressing herself to Langley, "there was that beautiful red coat with the arms on it, like you see on a half-crown. You remember they got it out for you to look at, sir; and when I brought in the tea it was hanging up in front of the tallboy."

Langley grimaced. "I believe I do remember it," he said, "now you remind me."

"There is the canon coming up the path now," Ellen said, with a glance through the window. "I will tell him you gentlemen are here."

She hurried from the room, and soon there entered a tall, stooping old man with a gentle face and the indescribable air of a scholar.

The superintendent went to meet him.

"I am a police officer, Canon Maberley," he said. "I and my friends have called to see you in pursuit of an official inquiry in connection with the people to whom your house was let last month. I do not think I shall have to trouble you much, though, because your parlormaid has given us already most of the information we are likely to get, I suspect."

"Ah! That girl," the canon said vaguely. "She has been talking to you, has she? She will go on talking forever if you let her. Please sit down, gentlemen. About the Vereys—ah yes! But surely there was nothing wrong about the Vereys? Mrs. Verey was quite a nice, well-bred person, and they left the place in perfectly good order. They paid me in advance, too, because they live in New Zealand, as she explained, and know nobody in London. They were on a visit to England, and they wanted a temporary home in the heart of the country, because that is the real England, as she said. That was so sensible of them, I thought—instead of flying to the grime and turmoil of London, as most of our friends from overseas do. In a way, I was quite touched by it, and I was glad to let them have the vicarage."

The superintendent shook his head. "People as clever as they

are make things very difficult for us, sir. And the lady never mentioned that her husband was a clergyman, I understand."

"No, and that puzzled me when I heard of it," the canon said. "But it didn't matter, and no doubt there was a reason."

"The reason was, I think," Mr. Owen said, "that if she had mentioned it, you might have been too much interested, and asked questions which would have been all right for a genuine parson's wife, but which she couldn't answer without putting her foot in it. Her husband could do a vicar well enough to pass with laymen, especially if they were not English laymen. I am sorry to say, canon, that your tenants were impostors. Their name was certainly not Verey, to begin with. I don't know who they are—I wish I did—they are new to us and they have invented a new method. But I can tell you what they are. They are thieves and swindlers."

The canon fell back in his chair. "Thieves and swindlers!" he gasped.

"And very talented performers, too," Trent assured him. "Why, they have had in this house of yours part of the loot of several country house burglaries which took place last year, and which puzzled the police because it seemed impossible that some of the things taken could ever be turned into cash. One of them was a herald's tabard, which Superintendent Owen tells me had been worn by the father of Sir Andrew Ritchie. He was Maltravers Herald in his day. It was taken when Sir Andrew's place in Lincolnshire was broken into, and a lot of very valuable jewelry was stolen. It was dangerous to try to sell the tabard in the open market, and it was worth little, anyhow, apart from any associations it might have. What they did was to fake up a story about the tabard which might appeal to an American purchaser, and, having found a victim, to induce him to buy it. I believe he parted with quite a large sum."

"The poor simp!" growled Langley.

Canon Maberley held up a shaking hand. "I fear I do not understand," he said. "What had their taking my house to do with all this?"

"It was a vital part of the plan. We know exactly how they went to work about the tabard; and no doubt the other things were got rid of in very much the same way. There were four of them in the gang. Besides your tenants, there was an agreeable and cultured person—I should think a man with real knowledge of antiquities and objects of art—whose job was to make the acquaintance of

wealthy people visiting London, gain their confidence, take them about to places of interest, exchange hospitality with them, and finally get them down to this vicarage. In this case it was made to appear as if the proposal to look over your church came from the visitors themselves. They could not suspect anything. They were attracted by the romantic name of the place on a signpost up there at the corner of the main road."

The canon shook his head helplessly. "But there is no signpost at the corner."

"No, but there was one at the time when they were due to be passing that corner in the confederate's car. It was a false signpost, you see, with a false name on it—so that if anything went wrong, the place where the swindle was worked would be difficult to trace. Then, when they entered the churchyard their attention was attracted by a certain gravestone with an inscription that interested them. I won't waste your time by giving the whole story—the point is that the gravestone, or rather the top layer which had been fitted onto it, was false, too. The sham inscription on it was meant to lead up to the swindle, and so it did."

The canon drew himself up in his chair. "It was an abominable act of sacrilege!" he exclaimed. "The man calling himself Verey—"

"I don't think," Trent said, "it was the man calling himself Verey who actually did the abominable act. We believe it was the fourth member of the gang, who masqueraded as the Vereys' chauffeur—a very interesting character. Superintendent Owen can tell you about him."

Mr. Owen twisted his mustache thoughtfully. "Yes; he is the only one of them that we can place. Alfred Coveney his name is; a man of some education and any amount of talent. He used to be a stage carpenter and property maker—a regular artist, he was. Give him a tub of papier-mâché, and there was nothing he couldn't model and color to look exactly like the real thing. That was how the false top to the gravestone was made, I've no doubt. It may have been made to fit on like a lid, to be slipped on and off as required. The inscription was a bit above Alf, though—I expect it was Gifford who drafted that for him, and he copied the lettering from other old stones in the churchyard. Of course the fake signpost was Alf's work, too—stuck up when required, and taken down when the show was over."

"Well, Alf got into bad company. They found how clever he was with his hands, and he became an expert burglar. He has served

two terms of imprisonment. He is one of a few who have always been under suspicion for the job at Sir Andrew Ritchie's place, and the other two when the chalice was lifted from Eynsham Park and the Psalter from Lord Swanbourne's house. With what they collected in this house and the jewelry that was taken in all three burglaries, they must have done very well indeed for themselves; and by this time they are going to be hard to catch."

Canon Maberley, who had now recovered himself somewhat, looked at the others with the beginnings of a smile. "It is a new experience for me," he said, "to be made use of by a gang of criminals. But it is highly interesting. I suppose that when these confiding strangers had been got down here, my tenant appeared in the character of the parson, and invited them into the house, where you tell me they were induced to make a purchase of stolen property. I do not see, I must confess, how anything could have been better designed to prevent any possibility of suspicion arising. The vicar of a parish, at home in his own vicarage! Who could imagine anything being wrong? I only hope, for the credit of my cloth, that the deception was well carried out."

"As far as I know," Trent said, "he made only one mistake. It was a small one, but the moment I heard of it I knew that he must have been a fraud. You see, he was asked about the oar you have hanging up in the hall. I didn't go to Oxford myself, but I believe when a man is given his oar it means that he rowed in an eight that did something unusually good."

A light came into the canon's spectacled eyes. "In the year I got my colors the Wadham boat went up five places on the river. It was the happiest week of my life."

"Yet you had other triumphs," Trent suggested. "For instance, didn't you get a fellowship at All Souls, after leaving Wadham?"

"Yes, and that did please me, naturally," the canon said. "But that is a different sort of happiness, my dear sir, and, believe me, nothing like so keen. And by the way, how did you know about that?"

"I thought it might be so, because of the little mistake your tenant made. When he was asked about the oar, he said he had rowed for All Souls."

Canon Maberley burst out laughing, while Langley and the superintendent stared at him blankly.

"I think I see what happened," he said. "The rascal must have been browsing about in my library, in search of ideas for the part

he was to play. I was a resident Fellow for five years, and a number of my books have a bookplate with my name and the name and arms of All Souls. His mistake was natural." And again the old gentleman laughed delightedly.

Langley exploded. "I like a joke myself," he said, "but I'll be skinned alive if I can see the point of this one."

"Why, the point is," Trent told him, "that nobody ever rowed for All Souls. There never were more than four undergraduates there at one time, all the other members being Fellows."

SOLUTION TO THE JANUARY "UNSOLVED":

The kingdom of Zabia won. The victor was Captain Grbil, commander of the *Burd* with the orange sails.

KINGDOM	SHIP	CAPTAIN	SAILS	NOTES
Xanda	<i>Cokk</i> <i>Auck</i>	Katt Ibeks	gray maroon	Sunk by the <i>Burd</i> Sank the <i>Duv</i> ; lost to the <i>Burd</i>
Yumta	<i>Duv</i> <i>Fowel</i>	Horsh Jakel	blue red	Sunk by the <i>Auk</i> Sank the <i>Egul</i> ; sunk by the <i>Burd</i>
Zabia	<i>Burd</i> <i>Egul</i>	Grbil Lynkz	orange pink	Sank the <i>Auck</i> , <i>Cokk</i> , <i>Fowel</i> Sunk by the <i>Fowel</i>

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



Marge Brock is a single mom with red hair, three kids, a keen eye for irony, and a remarkably well-developed memory. She also has a current freelance assignment that may prove deadly in L. A. Taylor's **Footnote to Murder** (Allau Press, \$4.95). A true-crime writer has hired Marge to research a list of unsolved homicides that he can then write up and publish as a "classic crime" anthology. Marge is surprised to turn up a series of rape-murders of redheads that occurred in England at the exact time her ex-husband, Charles, was attending Oxford. Of course, Marge was too busy supporting them as a young couple, writing Charlie's papers, and dealing with her first pregnancy to read about a local killing spree. Further library research, however, begins to strike her as downright creepy when she unearths a similar series of murders (of redheaded women again) committed in Boston soon afterwards. Marge and her ex were living in Boston then, too. And now that she's hanging out with Phil, the crime writer's son and an old friend from those early Oxford days, Marge-the-researcher can't help but notice that there's actually a group of viable suspects for those long-ago murders, men who were once her friends and who have also wound up in the same Midwestern city as Marge. Don't forget that Marge, dear reader, has red hair. Make an attempt to find this reprint of a 1983 mystery that's just been reissued by a small press. You'll find it well worth your while.

Another struggling divorcee is Diane Mott Davidson's Colorado caterer, Goldy Bear, back to serve up her own special recipe of humor and mystery in **The Cereal Murders** (Bantam, \$19.95). Goldy has agreed to cater the banquet for the college advisory

dinner at her son's prestigious prep school. The only thing deadly about the evening should have been the speeches, but the valedictorian's words turn out to be blessedly brief, if not particularly memorable. They also turn out to be his last. Join Goldy (*Catering to Nobody, Dying for Chocolate*) as she dishes up quips, shares her cooking secrets, and again ties on her "Amateur Sleuth" apron to solve a crime that increasingly points to the young apprentice who's been living with her. Davidson serves a hearty dish for readers who savor a soupçon of satire in their mysteries.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: history and mystery go together like a horse and its carriage. And if you like hansoms and coaches—or even chariots—in your crime fiction, you'll want to find **The Mammoth Book of Historical Whodunnits** (Carroll & Graf, \$9.95), edited by Mike Ashley. Organized into four sections—The Ancient World, The Middle Ages, Regency and Gaslight, and Holmes and Beyond—this is a big book with stories by lots of folks whom you may have already discovered, or merely will be glad you finally did. Both E. Peterses (Ellis and Elizabeth) are in here, along with tales by S. S. Rafferty, John Maddox Roberts, John Dickson Carr, Ed Hoch, Paul Harding, and many more. Avaricious history-mystery readers should also appreciate a foreword, afterword, and neat appendix.

Theresa Fortunato, the gifted psychic from the Edgar-nominated *Shattered Moon* (Dell, \$4.95), is back in Kate Green's fourth novel. Readers won't need the gift of second sight to recognize a compelling suspense novel in **Black Dreams** (HarperCollins, \$20). Young Tory disappears from her hospital bed in the dead of night, and Theresa begins receiving messages from the girl even before her homicide detective friend, Jardine, has given Theresa the girl's name. Working through a nonprofit organization that looks for missing children, Theresa find herself consulted first by Ellen, the girl's mother, and then by the woman's attractive ex-husband, Tory's father. When a middle-aged antiques dealer is found murdered, and Jardine spots a picture of Tory in the dead man's office, it appears that there is a tangled web indeed. As we watch the psychic bond between Theresa and the child grow, Green also lets us inside the head of Tory's abductor. Strong characters, a fascinating behind-the-scenes view of a professional psychic, and a shocking psychological twist make *Black Dreams* a book that will haunt readers. It should have fans clamoring for Theresa's next case.

Charlotte MacLeod praised Richard Timothy Conroy's first Smithsonian mystery, and chances are she'll be as fulsome about

Mr. Smithson's Bones (St. Martin's, \$17.95), the prequel to *The India Exhibition*. Henry Scruggs is a middle-aged foreign service officer whose once promising career has been inexplicably (to him) sidetracked. Instead of engaging in derring-do in exotic, faraway places, Henry finds himself assigned to the tiny Foreign Affairs contingency at the revered Smithsonian Institution. Usually it's busy paperwork and boring routine, broken only by the occasional assignment of giving foreigners a tour. That was before a serial killer with a dark sense of comedy began bumping off an entire committee. And since Henry seems to be destined to nose out the corpses (which begins to give readers an inkling of why his career was sidetracked), he'd better find the perpetrator before he finds himself in a real dead-end job—stamping license plates, for instance. Readers who like light fare served up by someone with a wickedly delicious sense of offbeat humor will probably agree with Ms. MacLeod.

Dianne G. Pugh's **Cold Call** (Pocket, \$20) introduces one tough cookie to the world of amateur sleuths. Iris Thorne's workday begins at four forty-five A.M., and is likely to end with takeout-for-one well after dark. In between, Iris makes most Type A's look like laggards. But crime isn't her metier. Iris is the top earner for McKinney Alitzer, an investment firm in L.A., and her success has naturally made her a target for the sophomoric jibes of the "Boys' Club," the fast-track guys in her office. Young Alley, the deaf office boy, was different, and very sweet, and he gravitated to Iris because she could talk to him in sign language. When Alley is killed on the street, an apparent victim of a mugging, Iris is saddened. When the police turn up in the person of an old flame who once dumped her, she's hostile. And when it looks as if they're going to write off Alley's death by implying that he was involved with gangs and drugs, she's furious. Seeing Iris furious is a sight to behold. Walking around in Iris's shoes is exhausting, but it sure was fun.

Even if I didn't so greatly admire Homer Kelly and his Yankee friends, I'd be a fan of Jane Langton for the pen and ink drawings that are always sprinkled throughout her mysteries. Now there are two fairly recent additions to the canon. **God in Concord** (Penguin, \$4.95) is set in Homer's hometown of Concord, Massachusetts. Among other devices to heighten the suspense, there's a plot to plunk down a mall on the banks of Walden Pond, no less. (Is nothing sacred?) There's also a veritable rash of untimely deaths among the senior population. Homer, fortunately, is on the scene with his gentle manner and his Yankee common sense and sense of justice. **Divine Inspiration** (Viking, \$20) is Langton's ninth

novel in this series, and it's especially fascinating for anyone who loves music. (Remember Langton's *Memorial Hall Murder*, with its musical theme?) In Boston, the First Church of the Commonwealth is in high dudgeon over the arrival of their huge new pipe organ. It's custom built, incredibly expensive, and designed to produce old fashioned sound not heard since organs became electro-pneumatic. Parishioners critical of the new organ are joking that the fire that half destroyed the old instrument (and killed the sexton) might have been intentional. Not exactly an auspicious beginning for the new organ, to be sure. One could make a case that this kind of after-Mass repartee is a little lacking in piety, not to mention charity. The appearance of a toddler crawling up the church steps, sans mother, causes another ripple. Readers who enjoy literary puzzles, musical musings, and plots scored in whimsy should race out to find Jane Langton novels. I recommend them all.

"Bad Love" is scrawled at the scene of more than one murder. It's also eerily spoken by a child's voice on a harrowing audio tape mailed to psychologist Alex Delaware at the opening of Jonathan Kellerman's latest thriller, **Bad Love** (Bantam, \$22.95). The only sense Alex can make of the words relates to a conference he was forced to co-host some twenty years earlier, when he was a young psychologist on staff at a local hospital. The conference was to honor the work of a then elderly and ailing psychologist named De Bosch; the centerpiece of his theories was "bad love," referring to abusive parenting and the results it can have on children. When events go beyond harassment, Alex and his cop buddy Milo take the offensive and begin to investigate. As Alex turns up participants in that old conference, he also turns up dead bodies. Coincidence? Or mass murder? Read *Bad Love*, and find out. Caution: once you've begun, you'll find it hard to put down.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



Fatal Instinct is worth watching if only to see the hunky Armand Assante in red leather heels dancing up a storm to Van Morrison's "Brown-Eyed Girl." Fortunately, this zany sendup of *Double Indemnity* and at least half a dozen other suspense thrillers is a knee-slapper from start to finish and is blessed with excellent comic performances by the entire cast.

Assante is Ned Ravine (it wouldn't hurt to guess what film that character's name comes from), a cop who moonlights as a defense attorney. The suspects he takes into custody are cuffed, then carded—with lawyer Ravine's business card.

Bumbling isn't the word for Ravine, who makes Inspector Clouseau look like Eliot Ness. He is so clueless he doesn't real-

ize the mechanic who's practically moved in to work on his wife's car in the driveway is also working on her in the bedroom.

Kate Nelligan looks devilishly close to Barbara Stanwyck as Ravine's scheming wife Lana. And when she gets a look at her husband's multi-million dollar life insurance policy, complete with a triple indemnity clause, she enrolls her dimwitted grease monkey lover (Christopher McDonald) in a plot to kill him.

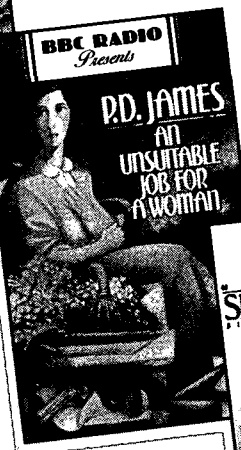
While his wife is trying to do him in, a mysterious and seductive new client who seeks out Ravine for help is simply trying to do him. Sean Young is an eyeful and absolutely hilarious as Lola Cain, the *femme fatale* in blonde hair, body hugging outfits, and plunging necklines. For good measure, her spike heels are always getting stuck

MURDER

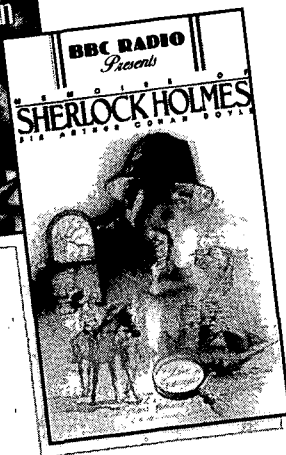
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The much-hyped Sharon Stone, whose lack of undergarments was the talk of the movie world after *Basic Instinct*, has nothing on Sean Young and her performance here. As Lola, Young has her own underwear scene and enjoys wielding an ice pick that doubles as a cigarette lighter. She goes way over the top as the Glenn Close-like obsessed lover after Ravine sends her packing. And Young clearly enjoys it.

Young and Assante also make love and war with a reckless abandon that makes *Fatal Attraction*ers Glenn Close and Michael Douglas mere minor leaguers.

Lana and Lola are two very tough dames—yes, they're dames, in the best Hollywood tradition—and are quite a handful for poor Ravine, who also manages to completely ignore the pie-eyed mooning of his loyal secretary, Laura Lincolnberry. Lovely Laura, perkily played by Sherilyn Fenn, is haunted by a series of flashbacks that reveal her former life, one that mirrors Julia Roberts' *Sleeping with the Enemy*. Like Roberts' tormented character, she too suffered at the hands of a domineering, perfec-

tionist husband and escaped only through faking her own drowning.

In addition to the trio of ladies who want him or want him dead, Ravine has to deal with the release from prison of Max Shady (James Remar), a cigar-smoking bad dude whose felonious conviction has been Ravine's only loss in the courtroom. Shady has vowed to get even.

As judges, Tony Randall and Eartha Kitt are splendid, as is real-life baseball announcer Bob Uecker, who plays a sportscaster announcing the court proceedings in the case of *California v. Lana Ravine*.

Although the plot takes a piece of this film and a piece of that film and pastes them together, it still tumbles along in a coherent manner. The countless gags also tumble onto the screen at breakneck speed. And since there are so many of them, it doesn't matter that they're not all side-splitters.

Some viewers may think *Fatal Instinct* is sophomoric. Well, they're probably right. But this Raymond Chandler-meets-*Airplane* tale is a welcome relief from many of today's so-called Hollywood thrillers that wind up offering too many unintentional laughs and not enough thrills.

THE STORY THAT WON



The October Mysterious Photograph contest was won by J. Alec West of Vancouver, tions go to James Sadlemyer Canada; Monica Iris Emig of Anderson of Mesa, Arizona; Susan Kloszewski of Woodside, New York; Todd H. Latoski of Longwood, Florida; Gail L. Rouskey of Ashland, Wisconsin; Mary Benton of Lubbock, Texas; Susan C. Trotter of Palm Harbor, Florida; Diane Walker of Bloomington, Minnesota; Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Wanda C. Keesey of Highspire, Pennsylvania.

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THE REPLACEMENT THIEF by J. Alec West

The woman's Persian cat was valuable. Its theft brought Officer Bailey to her home. With his patrol car parked, Bailey walked up one side of a grassy knoll. The grieving victim was at the bottom of the other side carrying a large purse and standing by a tree. Her face was buried behind a handkerchief as Bailey approached.

"Obviously the work of the 'replacement thief,'" Bailey said to the crying woman after seeing the stuffed toy cat in the tree. "The thief's M. O. is to steal something of value, leaving a toy replica in its place. But don't worry, ma'am. We'll get your cat back. Thieves make mistakes. We don't."

Instructing the woman to stand back, Bailey climbed a short distance up the tree to the toy cat. The next couple of minutes were spent scanning for evidence.

"Officer?" a man's voice came from behind Bailey. "What are you doing in my tree?"

"A woman called to report her cat stolen, and I was just..." Bailey interrupted his own reply, looking over his shoulder. "Where's that woman I was just talking to?"

"I don't know who or what you're talking about, officer," the man returned with a puzzled expression.

Bailey had a bad feeling as he jumped from the tree, racing back over the knoll toward the street. Parked where his patrol car had been just minutes ago was a foot-long toy police car, an all-day sucker resting on the hood.

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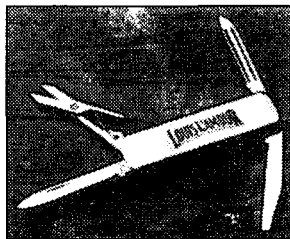
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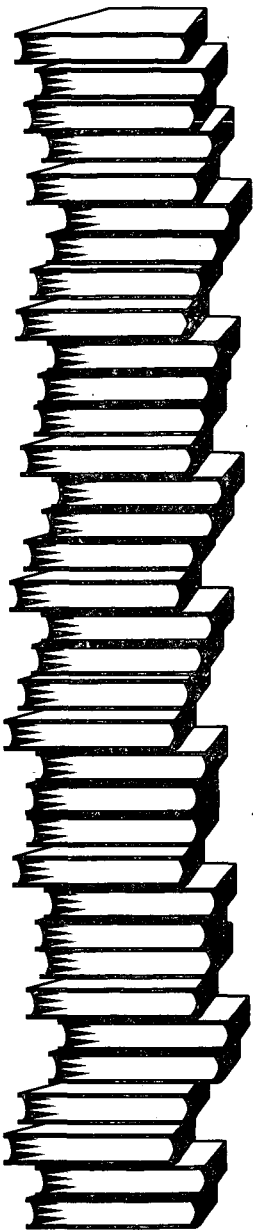
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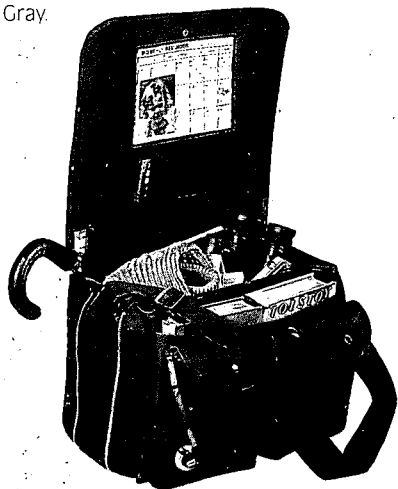
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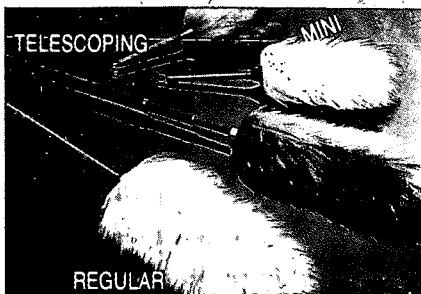
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